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# *Dark Forces*

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*William C Deitz*



## Book I

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# *Soldier of the Empire*

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## CHAPTER ONE

The relay that failed, and thereby saved Morgan Katarn's life, was an integral part of the pumping station that served the southeast quadrant of his homestead. Without the relay and the pump, his variform beans would wither and die. They, like the rest of the crops, needed the water that Morgan's one-thousand-year-old tap tree brought to the surface via tubular roots, or "taps" that descended hundreds of feet to siphon water from the underlying aquifer, water that was shared with Morgan's crops via endless lengths of imported irrigation tubing.

The workshop was a spacious area in which Morgan spent nearly all his time, when he was home, that is- which was less than he would have liked. His responsibilities as an agro-mech craftsman took more hours away than was good for the farming he did on the side as did the resistance movement. In the workshop were cupboards where his spare parts were stored, countertops strewn with tools, and bins filled with printouts, schematics, and designs. Morgan circled the worktable to peer at one of six monitors. It provided a rotating 3-D view of the pump's inner workings. The lines that described the offending relay had changed from green to red and blinked on and off.

Annoying – but easy to remedy.

Morgan made a note of the part number, opened a storage cabinet, found the matching box, and removed it. A puff of air touched the back of his neck and he heard Wee Gee's cooling fans. He turned and grinned. "Hey, old boy . . .

how's that solar panel? All fixed? Good work."

Morgan had designed the droid himself. Since he was a self-taught roboticist, it hadn't been easy. Form had been allowed to follow function, and Wee Gee looked anything but human. Though capable of assuming hundreds of configurations, Wee Gee always reverted to an inverted U shape. His right arm was three times more powerful than his left. It boasted no less than four articulated joints, and a C-shaped grasper. The left arm was less sturdy but was mounted with a human-style hand that could use the tools carried on the utility belt cinched around Wee Gee's processor housing.

What Morgan called the drive assembly linked both sides of the droid together and served as a platform for the vertical sensor pod that provided Wee Gee with the electronic equivalent of sight. Thanks to a repulsorlift engine salvaged from an Imperial speeder bike, and steering jets adapted from a junked probe droid, the machine floated two meters off the ground. An oval-shaped lens tilted toward Morgan and the droid made a chirruping sound. The human nodded in response.

"Sure, we'll tackle that in the morning. First things first, though . . . I've got to replace a part on pump four. You're in charge till I get back."

Wee Gee squeaked agreeably and plugged himself into one of the many data ports scattered around the complex. Once connected, the droid could monitor the entire farm from that single position.

The farmer considered a vehicle and decided against it. The walk would be good for both his spirits and his waistline. Morgan checked to ensure that his commlink was charged, grabbed the walking stick from a corner, and slipped through the door.

He took a breath of the crisp evening air and paused to watch Sullust rise. Morgan had friends there, many of whom belonged to the Alliance and were working towards the day when the New Order would be destroyed. That was no small task on a planet where the Emperor ruled through

the vast SoroSuub Corporation. Still, where there's a will there's a way, and they would succeed, Morgan was certain.

Walking briskly so as to raise his heart rate to aerobic levels, the farmer struck out towards the southeast. Dry grass crackled beneath his boots, lume bugs danced before his face, and stars appeared in the sky. They reminded Morgan of his son Kyle and the fact that he would graduate soon.

The thought that financial necessity rather than free choice had played a major role in Kyle's decision to attend the Imperial Military Academy still filled Morgan with guilt. The Katarn's were from the Outer Rim, with limited financial resources, and the Academy had represented Kyle's best chance for a good education.

Morgan frowned. Perhaps if he'd been a little more flexible, a little less focused on how money was made, there would be more of it. What would Kyle be like when he returned? Like the boy he'd said good-bye to? Or like the stormtroopers who swaggered through the spaceport?

The stars were silent, the lume bugs danced, and there was no way to know.

The *Vengeance* was not one of the Empire's larger Star Destroyers, nor was such a vessel required for the matter at hand. After all, why use a sword when a dagger would suffice? The thought pleased the mind that conceived it. The bridge was large and open. The crew stood in semicircular trenches cut into the highly polished deck.

The Dark Jedi known as Jerec stood above the command pit and stared at the moon that floated beyond. What he saw was a great deal more complex than what those around him perceived. Jerec was tall and thin to the point of emaciation. He kept his head shaved and black facial tattoos glowed on his pale skin. Empty eye sockets were hidden behind a band of black leather. His tunic, trousers, and boots were black. Jerec wore no insignia other than the symbols visible on his blood-red collar and kept his Jedi abilities secret.

Such was the nature of the man, however, and the power he commanded, that no signs of authority were necessary. Jerec acted under orders from Emperor Palpatine himself and looked forward to the day when all would kneel before him, though he was careful to hide such ambitions behind a veneer of loyalty.

Admiral Thrawn stood behind Jerec, slightly to his right. He was as tall as Jerec but the similarity ended there. Thrawn had shimmering blue-black hair, pale blue skin, and glowing red eyes, all of which testified to his alien origins and were rare in the Empire's xenophobic navy.

However, much as Palpatine might distrust other sentient species, he loved a winner, and Thrawn had collected more victories, medals, and promotions than most officers with twice his years of service. He stood with hands clasped behind his back and waited for his superior to speak. When the words came, Jerec's voice was soft, almost feminine. "The probe returned?"

"Yes, sir. There was no sign of a security breach. Surprise will be complete."

"The drop ship is ready?"

"Yes, sir. Loaded and ready."

"Excellent. You may begin."

"Yes, sir."

Thrawn had turned, and was about to leave, when Jerec spoke again. "One more thing . . ."

The officer turned at the sound. Of Jerec's voice. "Sir?"

"I want Morgan Katarn alive."

Thrawn was well aware of what Jerec wanted but nodded dutifully and said, "Yes, sir," with exactly the same intonation he had used the first time the order had been issued. Besides being a brilliant tactician, and even better strategist, Thrawn had still another virtue, and that was his absolute lack of ego.

Something of a necessity for an officer with alien origins in a military organization rife with patronage and politics.

Jerec, who wanted more than the next pathetic rank in another being's power structure, nodded and stalked away.



Thus dismissed, Thrawn tackled the business at hand. Orders had been given and he would carry them out.

Though roughly the same size as an Imperial assault shuttle, the Corellian built stock light freighter had less armament and still bore the scars accumulated while running supplies to Space Station Kwenn.

Captured with a hold full of black-market technics, she'd been added to the rag-tag collection of ships the Empire used for clandestine missions. She was typical of vessels pressed into service by the Alliance. Painted with registration numbers identical to those worn by one of their commerce raiders, she made a believable stand-in for the real thing. Retro's fired as she matched velocities with Sulon and prepared to land.

Within her hull, in a cargo compartment that still stank of the hydroponic supplies she had carried, a team of Special Operations commandos prepared for combat. Their leader, a thirty-something first lieutenant named Brazack, watched with all-seeing eyes. He had earned his commission the hard way in a battle so bloody, every single one of his superiors had been killed. His subsequent promotion came in the wake of a mission that produced no less than four medals of valor – all awarded posthumously.

His peers, almost all of whom had graduated from the Academy, resented Brazack and his almost mystical linkage with the troops assigned to him. In this case, his troops were the second platoon, B company, of the legendary Special Ops Group, known as Ghost Battalion.

In spite of their common membership in one of the Empire's most elite military organizations, every single member of the platoon was dressed in a rag-tag collection of mismatched clothes and armor meant to resemble what volunteer elements of the Alliance wore.

And the disguises would have been believable if it weren't for the standard-issue weapons they carried – and the fact that they were exclusively human, a rare circumstance where Reb units were concerned.

Brazack had objected to these discrepancies, and argued for a delay while they were remedied, but was overruled. He reacted the way he always did, with a shrug and a lopsided grin. And why not? It made no difference to Brazack if someone saw through the fiction, especially since he had lodged his protest in writing and retained a computer-generated receipt. Such precautions were second nature to someone who'd risen from the ranks.

The pilot announced, "Three to dirt," and Brazack walked slowly down the center corridor. He made eye contact with each member of the team as he spoke. "All right, men, you know the drill. We land, secure the Landing Zone, and collect the prisoner. Questions? No? Good! Nail this sucker and the drinks are on me."

The men grinned. They knew most officers would hardly acknowledge their status as human beings – much less buy them drinks. Which had everything to do with the fact that they would rather die than disappoint their leader.

The freighter came in out of the sun, sank to rooftop level, and opened up on the farm south of Morgan Katarn's. It belonged, they had been told, to a family named Danga. Lasers burped, buildings burst into flames, and variform cattle broke free of their holding pens. The Imperial pilot, a Caridian named Vester, grinned and circled for another pass. Give the groundies plenty of time for an ID, that's what the briefing said, and that's what he'd do.

A woman and two children broke from the cover provided by the fiercely burning farmhouse and ran for a nearby gully. Vester kicked the ship to the left, centered their images in the heads-up sight, and pressed a button. There was a satisfying flash as the colonists died.

"Missile . . ." his co-pilot said matter-of-factly, well aware of the fact that the freighter was way too low for the shoulder-launched device to arm itself, and fired a waist turret in reply. Bolts of energy hit the center of the vehicle park, marched towards the maintenance shed, and found Don Danga trying to reload. The shoulder-launched missile exploded and he disappeared.

The freighter shuddered, steadied, and headed north. By attacking the Danga farm prior to hitting the Katarn place, and greasing still another family on the way out, they hoped to create the impression of a hit-and-run Rebel raid. Vester didn't much care so long as he did all of the shooting and someone else did all of the dying. He chinned the intercom button. "Okay, Lieutenant . . . thirty to dirt."

Brazack acknowledged the message, took one last look at his men, and stood on the belly ramp. He took pride in leading from the front – and planned to be the first one out.

Vester watched the Katarn farm grow larger, swerved to avoid an enormous tree, and lit his repulsors. The ship staggered, caught and pancaked in. Not very pretty – but ideal when seconds count.

Brazack felt the skids hit, slapped the button next to the hatch and dived through the opening. He executed a shoulder roll, allowed forward momentum to bring him up, and opened fire. That would keep down the heads of anyone waiting in the farmhouse. Windows shattered and curtains started to smolder. No one fired in return. The platoon poured out of the ship, formed a skirmish line, and waited for orders.

Vester waited till the commandos were clear, lit his repulsors, and departed northward. His job was to inflict additional damage, provide fire support if called upon to do so, and make the final pickup. A quick check confirmed that a flight of five TIE fighters had secured his escape route. The mission was on the rails and Vester was happy.

Morgan Katarn had arrived on the south slope of the hill that stood between his house and the southeast quad when he heard the rumble of in-system engines and saw the low-flying ship. He viewed the vessel as little more than a curiosity at first, a pilot so stupid that he or she had missed the spaceport to the east and was searching for landmarks. Then he noticed that the running lights had been extinguished and that the vessel was flying below official minimums, and his stomach felt funny. That kind of feeling had protected him in the past.

Within a fraction of a second from the time the doubts first entered his mind, the ship opened fire. Morgan stood stunned as lasers stabbed the ground, an SLM went off high above, and something exploded.

Morgan fumbled the electrobinoculars out of their belt pouch and brought them to his eyes. The device captured what light there was, enhanced it, and fed the results to the eyepiece. By pressing "zoom" followed by "record" Morgan was able to document what was happening.

The Katarn house was a modest structure, only half of which appeared aboveground. The rest, for reasons of cost and insulation, was surrounded by carefully packed earth. Brazack waited for Corporal Koyo to kick the door in, waited for defensive fire that never came, and entered with his weapon at ready. The living room had a dusty, unlivable feel, as if it was more for show than use, and contained little of value or interest.

Brazack pointed toward a pair of doors. "Kayo . . . Santo . . . see where those go. And keep your eyes peeled for Katarn."

The men had memorized Morgan's face during the simulation briefing. They managed to withhold the "Yes, sirs" that came naturally to their lips and said "Gotcha," instead.

Rank hath privilege and Brazack had assigned the most interesting avenue of investigation to himself. It led through an archway and into a workshop. He had no more than passed through the entryway when something struck him in the chest and threw him backward. The armor beneath his shirt prevented serious injury but it hurt nonetheless. The missile consisted of a partially disassembled servo mechanism, and in spite of the fact that Wee Gee had thrown the device with unerring accuracy, the threat index was extremely low. However, the commandos reacted as they would to any threat, and used overwhelming force.

The antipersonnel grenade hit the floor, launched itself into the air, and exploded. The droid squeaked pitifully. Santo put a beam through the machine's speaker grill. Wee Gee considered further resistance, decided against it, and

sent an electronic warning to Morgan Katarn.

High on the hill behind the farm Morgan both heard and felt his beeper go off, knew the raiders had found Wee Gee, and touched the button that would silence it. A lump formed in his throat. Yes, Wee Gee was a machine, but he'd been a friend as well.

Helpless to do anything more than document what transpired, the farmer saw fires appear among his out-buildings, and saw the ship return from the north and squat in front of his house. There was something about the raiders that bothered Morgan. It eluded him at first, but then he had it. The so-called Rebels carried identical weapons! Not to mention that every single one of them was human. They looked like Rebels, but they weren't Rebels, so what did that leave? The simple answer, the obvious answer, was Imperial troops. Sent to kill and/or capture Reb leaders. That would explain the attack.

Morgan dropped to the ground as the ship fired repulsors and rose into the air. Fires, the last ones no larger than sparks, marked the ship's passage to the west. Morgan shook his head sadly. If the Imperials thought such raids would suppress the Rebellion, they were wrong. Many would suffer this night – and their hatred would grow. The challenge was to focus their emotion, to transmute negative energy into positive.

Morgan watched the fires in acid around his house disappear. Activated by the household computer, and fed by the tap tree, his sprinkler system had cut in. He frowned and bit his lip. Possessions could be replaced, but what of Wee Gee? And more importantly, the map which Rahn had entrusted to him. Was it intact? Did the Imperials understand how valuable it was?

Morgan ached to return, to check on his home, but knew a trap could be waiting.

Morgan turned, low-crawled off the skyline, and trudged toward the east. Opportunity dwells within disaster. That's what his friend Rahn liked to say – and he hoped it was true.



Thrawn received the unenviable task of telling Jerec that while the raid had been successful, the commandos had been unable to find and capture Morgan Katarn. Never one to delay an unpleasant task, Thrawn marched down a gleaming corridor, nodded to the stormtroopers who stood guard outside Jerec's suite, and requested entrance. It came without delay. Having no eyes and no sight, not in the ordinary sense, anyway, Jerec sat in almost total darkness. Only the soft glow provided by the bridge repeaters and light switches lit the room. The lack of illumination was intended to be intimidating, and would have been for anyone but Thrawn, who came from a species that boasted exceedingly good night vision. He waited for Jerec to speak.

"You bring bad news."

Thrawn took note of the fact that the comment came in the form of a statement rather than a question.

How did Jerec know? There was no way to tell. "Yes, sir."

"You may continue."

The naval officer delivered his report the same way he delivered all reports – without excuse or elaboration. Once Thrawn was finished, thirty seconds elapsed before Jerec spoke. "Was Katarn warned?"

"There's no evidence to support that theory, sir. Lieutenant Brazack believes the subject left the farm on some sort of errand."

"Or felt a need to go elsewhere," Jerec mused out loud. "He feels the Force, and even uses it on occasion, but is afraid to reach out and seize his inheritance. 'What if I make a mistake?' he wonders. 'What if I abuse the power?' 'Can I be trusted?' Such silliness is beyond all reckoning! I can feel his presence from orbit. Working, fussing, scheming. All for naught."

Thrawn allowed one eyebrow to rise. In spite of the fact that Jerec went to considerable lengths to hide certain abilities from those above him, chosen subordinates were allowed the occasional glimpse. "Sir . . . yes, sir."

"Of course this holds no interest for you," Jerec sneered.

“For you’re a being of the physical world, a doer of deeds, a manipulator of objects. Well, O doer of deeds, I will provide you and Lieutenant Brazack an opportunity to redeem yourselves and collect yet another of the commendations you thrive on. Listen carefully, for there is much to do.”

The room was circular and packed with people. With the exception of an Alliance news team, dispatched to record the proceedings as part of the communications effort required to unite hundreds of sentient species under a single command, the colonists came from all over the district. They were hard men and women, lean of body, used to adversity. Each had been elected to represent at least ten others. They paid strict attention to what was said.

Everything about Skorg Jameson was big, starting with his body and extending to his voice, hand gestures, and movements. He had long shaggy hair that touched the tops of his shoulders, a chest that bulged under his leather jerkin, and boots planted like tree trunks at the center of the hard-packed floor. He stood with his back to a massive fireplace and glared at those around him.

“I say the time is now! You saw what happened to Danga, to Katarn, and a dozen more . . . It’s time to make a stand and show others what we can do!”

It was a brave speech, and Morgan admired Jameson for making it. Especially in light of the fact that a spy could be present, or a listening device so sophisticated it had escaped the pre-meeting sweep. Of course the words did have a rehearsed quality, and could be part of Jameson’s campaign for Sector Leader. There was applause and Morgan allowed it to fade away before speaking his mind.

“I too tire of the pressure, the extortion, and the attacks. That’s why it’s tempting to look for an opportunity to strike back . . . but at what cost? Yes, some extremely interesting intelligence has come our way. Assuming that citizen Jameson’s source of information is correct, and Imperials disguised as Rebels or mercenaries are planning to attack the G-Tap. “

"Which would force us to buy a fusion plant from the SoroSuub Corporation, and pay taxes to the Empire," Jameson added pointedly.

"Exactly," Morgan said agreeably. "Which is why we sold shares and drilled the shaft to begin with. But what if there's an even deeper purpose? To not only destroy the Tap, but to lure us into a pitched battle and eliminate the Rebel infrastructure on Sulon? Guerilla raids are one thing, but our forces aren't trained or equipped to fight Special Operations commandos. If we lose, we lose more than the G-Tap, we lose Sulon herself."

A good many heads nodded, and voices murmured agreement. Still, only seconds elapsed before one of Jameson's cronies stepped forward to reiterate the big man's point of view. The meeting lasted a full four hours, and by the time it was over, a consensus had been established. The time had come. The Sulon Rebels would defend the G-Tap with everything they had.

The meeting was adjourned and the colonists headed for their vehicles. A highly modified probe droid watched from the cover of some trees. The robot counted the number of people who left, made infrared recordings of their movements, and listened to their parting comments. A summary went to the *Vengeance* seconds after the last conspirator departed and reached Jerec only minutes after that. The Dark Jedi listened to the report and returned to his carefully scented meal. He smiled. Seeds had been sown, crops had flourished, and the harvest was at hand.

The upper end of the Geo Thermal, or G-Tap, was located in a sizable cavern chosen both for its relative proximity to the heat trapped in crustal rock formations three kilometers below, and the fact that it was imper-vious to air attack. A number of prefab structures had been erected around it, including buildings to house the water injection pumps, giant turbines, and adjunct control rooms. Morgan's assignment lay elsewhere, but he paused to catch his



breath, and admire what the colonists had accomplished.

The principle was relatively simple and had been put to use on various worlds prior to the rise of the New Order. Crustal rock formations are warmed by volcanic action, an upwelling of magma, and the natural decay of potassium, thorium, and uranium. By drilling extremely deep wells, the colonists could force water down through carefully engineered cracks, where it could be heated and pumped to the surface. There it would bring isobutane to a boil which would be forced through power-generating turbines. And all this was done without radioactive waste, potentially dangerous technology, or governmental taxes.

That was the idea anyway, and, judging from the nearly completed complex, would soon be a reality.

Assuming they could defend it. A voice caused Morgan to turn. "Citizen Katarn? I hoped I'd run into you."

The information officer's name was Candice Ondi. She had brown hair, large intelligent eyes, and an ever-ready smile. In spite of the fact that she was dressed in the ubiquitous gray coveralls that many Rebs wore instead of a uniform, Morgan knew she had a nice figure. He'd have been interested under normal circumstances, but the possibility that many of those around him might be dead soon acted to neutralize any such thoughts.

Ondi traveled with a specially equipped chrome-plated protocol droid called "A-Cee." The robot spoke dozens of languages, had a zoom lens where its right eye sensor should have been, and the ability to record and digitally store more than a thousand hours of audio and video.

A-Cee walked with the slightly jerky motion typical of his kind and was engaged in a never-ending search for pickup shots.

Morgan found the possibility that the droid might be recording at any given time more than a little annoying and forced a smile. "Captain Ondi... how nice to see you again."

The officer laughed. "I see you're thrilled. Listen, I wanted to thank you for the footage. I'm sorry about what the commandos did to your farm, but a picture's worth a

thousand words. Hundreds of thousands of sentients will see it and know what happened here.”

A column of Rebels jogged by, weapons held across their chests, headed for the canyon below. That was the most direct approach to the cavern and the one they expected the Imperials to take. The river which was to have fed the G-Tap would provide the stormtroopers with a straight-ahead approach.

Morgan turned to Ondi. She dropped a holocam and allowed it to dangle from her wrist. Her eyes were greenish-brown and seemed to see his innermost thoughts. “So, Morgan Katarn, you don’t think much of our chances, do you?”

Conscious of his role as a leader, and the importance of good morale, Morgan lied. “On the contrary, Captain Ondi, I think we’ll win.”

The information officer clearly didn’t believe him. She nodded soberly, smiled crookedly, and removed a piece of lint from his shoulder. There was something personal about the gesture, which reminded Morgan of Kyle’s mother. He smiled. “Take care of yourself, Captain. No matter what happens today, make sure they see it.”

Ondi nodded, a noncom called Morgan’s name, and he turned away. They never saw each other again. In spite of the fact that Major Noda had nominal command of ground forces, he was well aware of the fact that Jerec monitored everything he said and did via commlink transmissions, probe droids, and his own seemingly supernatural powers. The knowledge added to the already considerable amount of stress Noda was under.

Though naturally cautious, Noda was no coward, and had bumped the ATAT’s commanding officer to see the terrain for himself. The walker was over fifteen meters tall and lurched from side to side as it waded upstream. Heavily eroded banks, their tops decorated with hardy-looking bushes, rose to either side.

A great deal of time and energy had been spent painting Rebel insignia on the ATs. Noda considered such efforts a

waste of time. After all, the very notion that the Rebels could capture such powerful weapons and turn them against their owners was absurd. Still, orders were orders, and the charade would continue.

The pilot, who had spent most of the last three days in an AT-AT simulator preparing for this precise moment, handled the current with ease. Water swirled white around the machine's massive legs and raced downstream. A bend obscured the river ahead and Noda watched as the second of two AT-STs disappeared behind it. There was an explosion, smoke boiled up from the point the walkers should be, and the battle began.

Although Morgan didn't actually see the missile hit the AT-ST, he heard the commlink chatter that described it, and saw the smoke boil up from the canyon. In spite of his position as a resistance leader and respected member of the community, Morgan had relatively little military expertise. That's why he'd been relegated to what the Rebels commonly referred to as the "back door," the flat area above the cavern, which was accessed via an easily defended passageway that wound down through a series of caves and vaults and into the main chamber.

Which explained why the twenty-six soldiers under Morgan's command were teenagers or senior citizens. They cheered as the walker exploded and were still celebrating when a woman named Grawley touched his arm. She'd been a Master Sergeant in the Republic's Army and was the only member of his platoon with real combat experience. "Look, Morgan! Coming out of the sun!"

Morgan pulled his visor into place and turned towards the sun. The vessel was too far away for a positive ID – but the Rebel knew what it was: the same Corellian-built freighter that had attacked his farm, loaded with commandos and headed his way.

He switched to the platoon frequency and warned his troops. "There's an imperial assault ship headed in. Don't be fooled by the Rebel markings. Everyone but the missile team into the passageway. Trot . . . Jen . . . kill that ship

before it lands.”

“Gotcha!” Trot said enthusiastically. “Don’t worry, Morgan – the ship is toast. Come on, Jen – load my tube.”

The teenagers took up a position behind some boulders as the rest of the platoon scurried for the protection of the passageway. Trot, his eyes on the heads up display projected on the inside surface of his visor, watched the ship grow larger. The launch tube rested on his right shoulder. The trick was to wait, thereby increasing the chance of a hit, but not too long since the SLM needed time to arm itself.

That’s where old man Danga had gone wrong. Trot was determined to do it right. Vester fired retros, lit his repulsors, and allowed the bow to rise as the ship sank. That blocked his view of the ground but put more metal between him and whatever the groundies chose to send his way. It was a trick that infantry officers frowned on since it exposed the ship’s belly to more enemy fire.

Brazack felt the deck tilt, knew what Vester was doing, and swore under his breath. This wasn’t the time or place to deal with the pilot, but later, after the battle was over, he would find the little creep and teach him a lesson.

Trot heard a soft beeping sound through his car plug, checked to make sure the crosshairs were properly centered on the underside of the ship, and pressed the firing stud. The tube lurched as the SLM raced upwards, hit the freighter dead on, and exploded. The ship lurched, slipped sideways, and steadied under Vester’s hands. The Corellian shields, built to withstand the rigors of space combat, held.

Trot felt a vague uneasiness in the pit of his stomach, waited for Jen to shove a second SLM into the tube, and fired again. The missile had barely left the launcher when the laser beam found it. Trot, Jen, and the boulders they had been hiding behind vanished in a flash of light.

Morgan winced, thought about their families, and winced again. Then the freighter was down, commandos disguised as rebels were pouring out of its belly, and lasers were

probing the rocks. Morgan fired and had the satisfaction of seeing an Imperial fall. Then it was time to pull back, take up a position behind the first of many preprepared rock barricades, and fight the first of what would turn out to be a long series of delaying actions.

The Rebels fought well, much better than Jerec, Thrawn, Noda, or Brazack thought they could or would, but the result was inevitable. Just as Morgan and his steadily diminishing team were driven inexorably down, the rest of the Rebel force, those who had confronted Noda down in the canyon, were forced up and back. The Imperials paid a bloody price for each and every foot of ground they gained, but there were more of them and they were better trained. Finally, after four hours of intense combat, both contingents of stormtroopers met in the main chamber. The ensuing fight was brief and more than a little one-sided.

Only thirty-seven colonists were left by that time. Those who could stand were lined up in front of the nearly completed G-Tap and sorted according to instructions issued by Jerec. Major Noda consulted a data pad as he inspected each face. Information provided by Jerec's agents combined with data compiled by probe droids had been used to create detailed profiles. Most of the Rebels would be put to death. A few, those who held leadership positions, would be held for interrogation.

Morgan Katarn had been wounded two hours before. He swayed slightly as Major Noda made his way down the line. The Rebel leader harbored no illusions. He knew what awaited him and felt nothing but sadness, not for himself, but for the young people whose lives had barely begun.

Noda's face was little more than a blur when it appeared in front of him. Morgan had the vague impression of black hair; almond-shaped eyes, and high cheekbones. The voice was brusque and unemotional.

"Jerec wants this one – take him to the shuttle."

Hands grabbed Morgan's arms; he struggled to free himself, and fell as vertigo pulled him down.

A noncom slapped Morgan across the face while a medic injected something into his arm. Whatever it was cleared the cobwebs and left him unnaturally alert. So much so that he could see nearly microscopic differences between hull rivets, hear air as it passed through the recycling ducts, and feel drops of sweat as they popped through the surface of his skin. All for what? So he could feel pain more acutely and tell them what they wanted to know.

Morgan felt the toes of his boots bump over durasteel hull plating as the stormtroopers dragged him into the interrogation chamber and allowed him to fall. He was admiring the precision with which the construction droids had mated two of the floor plates when a pair of shiny black boots appeared in front of his face. They frightened him and he wasn't sure why.

Hands grabbed Morgan under the armpits and lifted him to his feet. Black tattoos covered the lower portion of the face before him. The drugs in his bloodstream brought them to life. They slithered back and forth. He searched for his tormentor's eyes, for the pathway to his spirit, and found nothing but blackness. The man's words were soft and smelled of mint. This was the one known as Jerec. Morgan had heard of him.

"Citizen Katarn – how nice to see you. Which would you prefer? A long, painful conversation? Or something brief and to the point? I would choose the second, less difficult path if I were in your position."

Morgan's mouth felt desert dry. He worked his mouth as if preparing to speak, mustered some saliva, and aimed for Jerec's face. The liquid fell woefully short and splattered on the other man's boots.

Jerec hook his head mockingly. "How disappointing. I expected more from someone of your reputation. A snappy reply, a Rebel slogan, or heroic silence. Ah, well, it's always better to overestimate one's opponents than the other way around. Now tell me, who do you take orders from, and where are they?"

Morgan felt his heart pound against his chest. So that was

it. Jerec hoped to start at the bottom and work his way up through the Rebel chain of command. Kill the leaders and you kill the revolution. It was as simple as that. He thought about Kyle, wished he'd been allowed to see him one last time, and willed himself to die. It didn't work. His mouth was still dry and words felt unwieldy.

"A Gamorrean princess delivers my orders every morning and lives under my barn."

Jerec fingered the baton-shaped vibroblade. Energy sizzled. The stink of ozone filled the air. Morgan thought about Kyle and the man he hoped his son would be. There was an explosion of light, his wife's face, and a feeling of peace.

Jerec heard Morgan's head thump against the deck, found the vibroblade's off switch, and restored the device to his belt. "Many years ago I had the somewhat dubious pleasure of passing through Sulon's spaceport. A plain, rather spartan facility, as I recall – has it changed?"

A noncom, the most senior trooper present, snapped to attention. He was terrified and unable to conceal it. "Sir! No, sir!"

"Excellent. That being the case I would like to add a little color to the place. Install this head where all may see and take inspiration from it. In the meantime, I want the following message sent to Emperor Palpatine `Sulon has been pacified. Your obedient servant, Jerec.'"

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## CHAPTER TWO

Kyle Katarn didn't want to die. Not for the Emperor, not for the Empire, and not for anyone else. The realization brought color to his cheeks and Kyle was grateful for the glossy white armor that protected his body and concealed his features. The men around him were real stormtroopers and, if it weren't for his helmet, would have seen the fear in his eyes.

Of course that's what the Omega Exercise was for – to test cadets in battle and see what they were made of. Those who completed their missions with a satisfactory score would receive their commissions and graduate from the Imperial Military Academy at Cliffside on Carida. Failures like Kyle would serve in the ranks. An honorable occupation for anyone but a cadet. Maybe the Rebels would kill him before he could embarrass himself. A rather unusual wish for a cadet to make.

A pair of TIE fighters made the third of three consecutive runs, declared the asteroid "clean," and vectored away. The assault boat, just one of hundreds of support craft carried aboard the Star Destroyer *Imperator*, shuddered slightly and dumped speed as the pilot fired his retros. It required skill to match velocities with an asteroid and AX-456 was no exception. Maybe the pixel pixies back on the ship knew why the Rebs chose 456 for their relay station and maybe not. Not that it mattered much. A ride is a ride and the pilot went where they told him to.

The sun broke over the planetoid's horizon and activated



the polarizing filter in the pilot's face mask. He checked course and speed, pushed the nose down, and chinned the intercom.

"We are three repeat three - to dirt. Check life support and prepare for insertion."

Frightened though Kyle was, he'd been trained for this moment, and reacted without thinking. "Systems check - top down. Katarn green."

The names came in order, starting with his second in command, Sergeant Major Hong, followed by the members of squads one, two, and three. Everything checked, leaving the entire outfit "green and clean."

Kyle tried to report, heard his voice crack, and tried again. "Cadet Leader Katarn here - all systems green. Ready for insertion."

"Roger that," the pilot replied matter-of-factly. "Atmospheric decompression commencing now. Thirty to dirt."

Kyle chinned the command freq and gave the appropriate orders. "Decomp underway. Thirty to dirt. Lock and load."

The stormtroopers sat on bench-style seats with their backs to the bulkheads. They brought their assault weapons to the vertical position, aligned power paks with receiver slots, and shoved them into place. Forgetting to do so was the kind of thing greenies did and got killed for.

Kyle checked to ensure that his power source was "locked," verified the "full load" reading, and released the safety. The cadet carried a side arm as well, but he knew better than to check it. Not with fifteen seconds remaining.

Time seemed to slow. Lead filled his stomach and he was unexplainably sleepy. What was the quote? The one carved into the mantel above the fireplace in Cliffside's ceremonial dining room? Something about how cowards die a thousand deaths...?

Then, before Kyle could count how many times he had died during the last few hours, the assault boat hit. It bounced once, twice, and stuck. Like the first landings he had attempted, only better.

The port and starboard hatches opened and the squad

leaders led their men into hard vacuum. Hong stood between the hatches with his back to the cockpit. He had a small body and a big voice. "Move it, move it, move it! What the heck are you waiting for, Briggs? An engraved invitation? Get out there and kill some Rebels!"

Kyle felt an ice-cold hand grab hold of his stomach, forced himself to stand, and wondered when the fighting would start. The Rebs should have reacted by now, should have opened fire with everything they had, but nothing had happened. Why? Or, better yet, why not? Maybe the rumors were true. Maybe the optimists were right for a change. Maybe ninety percent of senior missions were walkovers.

The hand released his stomach for a moment and Kyle shuffled towards the bow. Gravity was tenuous at best, and even though the entire platoon had spent two days in a prestrike acclimation tank, it took time to adjust. Hong snapped to attention. "Troops deployed, sir – no sign of opposition."

Kyle wondered what was taking place behind the dark gray lenses and white armor. How much did Hong know? Did he have any idea how frightened his commanding officer was? How close to crumbling? There was no way to tell. But one thing was for sure, Hong's opinion would weigh heavily when his final score was tallied. Assuming he got that far . . .

Kyle knew the proper response and delivered it in the calm, matter-of-fact style favored by Cliffside's instructors. "Thank you, Sergeant Major. Let's get on with it."

"Yes, Sir."

Kyle stepped out of the hatch first, followed by Hong. Dust fountained up around his boots and fell in slow motion. The ground was rugged and almost universally gray. Impact craters marked the spots where meteorites had slammed into the surface. They provided excellent cover and the troopers took advantage of it. The assault boat crouched on a rise where it could lift quickly – or offer fire support if called upon to do so. The whole thing looked like a text-book scenario, which added to Kyle's confidence.

Maybe, just maybe, he would survive. Kyle, more from curiosity than bravado, remained standing. The electro-binoculars provided magnification and range as he scanned the enemy base. The installations included a comm dish, a boxlike structure, and a landing pad. They had a raw, improvised look. The pre-mission simulation had portrayed the constructs as only fifty-percent complete, but that data was two weeks old, and the Rebs had been busy since then.

The purpose of the facility, and others like it, was a matter of conjecture. Intel's best guess was that the Rebs were trying to establish a network of relay stations that could pass intelligence and psyprop broadcasts from one sector to another. All part of the battle for the hearts and minds of the civilian population.

Not that it made a heck of a lot of difference. Whatever the purpose, Kyle knew that what he saw on the surface didn't say much about the rest of the complex. No, based on the intelligence gathered by an Imperial probe droid, there might be as many as a hundred Rebs living and working beneath the surface. Especially during the construction phase. So where were they? Was the situation a walkover or a trap?

He turned to Hong. "Send the scouts. Tell them to keep a sharp eye out. This place is too darned quiet."

Hong, who privately agreed, thanked the gods of war for a greenie who had some brains, and gave the necessary orders. "Dobbs, Trang, Sutu . . . take a look. Somebody built that dish – find 'em."

The scouts, each from a different squad, cursed their rotten luck and low-crawled forward. Ribbons of slowly falling dust spiraled up around them and marked their progress. They knew that made them easy meat for a sniper, had there been one to shoot at them.

Kyle scanned the area. The stars were smears of distant light. The crags, those that had survived, stood as they had for thousands of years. In spite of the fact that everything looked normal – it didn't feel normal – and that was what bothered him. Both because he'd been trained to make fact

based decisions, and because the feeling was so strong. Someone, something, was watching. That's the way it felt. But the reports said otherwise.

"Trang – lots of tracks – nothing else. Over."

"Dobbs – ditto. Over."

"Sutu – looks clear. Over."

The fear was back and Kyle swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. "Sergeant Major – the second squad will blow the lock, one will provide cover, and three will follow me."

Hong nodded. "Yes, sir. You heard the Cadet Leader, Sergeant Morley. Let's get cracking."

Based on information provided by the probe droid, demolitions charges had been prepared in advance.

They had been placed and were ready for detonation by the time Kyle arrived.

The entry was a massive affair built to withstand a meteor hit. Two magnetic demo charges had been attached to the metal faceplate. It was a standard prefab affair set into quick-drying permacrete and controlled via numeric key pad. The straight-ahead "here-I-am" vid pickup located next to the frame had been blinded with spray seal, as had the tiny pinhead lens hidden into the right-hand sidewall. Very sneaky. How many more existed? And where were they located?

Morley spoke with his characteristic drawl. "She's ready to blow, sir."

Kyle looked around. The troopers assumed it was one last check prior to giving the order, but he knew the action for what it really was. A search for an excuse, any excuse, to scrub the mission. None presented itself. The hand took hold of Kyle's stomach, sweat prickled his skin, and his voice sounded thick. "Take cover – detonate on my command."

The stormtroopers pulled back and found cover. Kyle stepped around the corner of the building, took a deep breath, and gave the order. "Now."

Morley triggered the remote and an eruption of dust

signaled that the charges had been detonated. This was the moment Kyle had been dreading, when he would step through the hatch and take a blaster bolt in the chest. He wanted to speak, wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words. His movements were jerky, like those of the toy soldiers his father had fashioned for him. Miniature robots that marched this way and that, saluted when they saw him, and tripped over irregularities in the workshop floor.

Suddenly, without remembering how he had arrived there, Kyle was inside the hatch. He had no more than entered when Morley brushed past him, slapped another charge against the inside door, and hollered "Duck!" The "sir" was an obvious afterthought.

The inner charges exploded with a flash of light. Morley jumped up, shoved the heavily damaged slab of metal to one side, and swore as a blaster bolt bounced off his reflective armor. An ambush? Kyle's worst fears had been realized. A wave of self-pity swept over him. He had joined to get an education, not die on some asteroid. It wasn't fair. Or was it? After all, no one had forced him to attend the Academy, he had chosen to do so – and the men were waiting for an order. Four years of hard, rigorous training kicked in.

"Contact! Two grenades – one concussion – one high-explosive."

The words were no more than out of Kyle's mouth than two grenades sailed through the door, exploded, and threw shrapnel in every direction. Morley passed through the hole first, followed by Kyle, Hong, and the members of squad two. Suddenly, Kyle was faced with the harsh reality of what war does to people.

He swallowed to keep his breakfast down and looked ahead. The next lock, a backup in case a meteorite destroyed the first one, opened automatically. Kyle entered ready to fire. The second door was closed and there was little doubt as to what waited on the other side. "Second squad? Heavy weapons to the front – pack the lock."

Two stormtroopers, both armed with blaster cannons and

the power modules necessary to operate them, took up positions in front of the door. Ten additional troopers filled in behind. Hong slapped a button and the door cycled shut. Kyle clenched his teeth. "First rank, prepare to fire – second, third, and fourth ranks, rifle salute."

The rifle salute, normally rendered to officers while under arms, forced the second, third, and fourth ranks to hold their weapons in the vertical position and guarded against an accidental discharge.

The hatch slid open, the first rank fired, and reeled as the fire storm hit them. The first line of stormtroopers died within a matter of seconds, quickly followed by at least half of the second. Not without cost, however, since there was little to no cover in the room beyond, and the Rebels were exposed.

Kyle felt anger replace the fear that had very nearly paralyzed him, fired his weapon, and yelled encouragement. "Come on, men! Take them out!"

Kyle stepped out of the lock and shot a woman through the chest. She fell in slow motion and the cadet felt shock course through his body. This was a person, not a target – and the realization froze him in place. He felt a terrible sense of remorse, and stood frozen while Morley clutched his faceplate and fell over backwards.

The Rebel who killed Morley was little more than a boy, but he was old enough to take a life, and Kyle shot him through the chest. The words came from deep within and boomed through the command channel. If his men thought them strange they had no opportunity to comment on the matter. "Morley was a person, too!"

The battle raged on. The Rebs were a diverse bunch. Kyle saw men, women, and a scattering of aliens, some of which he recognized and some he didn't. They came in all colors, shapes, and sizes and fought with weapons as varied as they were. Kyle saw blasters old and new, plus some low-velocity projectile weapons, and at least one pre-Empire vibroaxe of the sort used to board enemy starships. It was an ugly weapon and cut through Imperial armor as if it

were constructed from paper. Hong shot the axeman through the head, shot him a second time just to make sure, and led the charge that secured the room and fifty feet of passageway.

With that accomplished, Kyle took a moment to assess the situation. A quick count revealed that the platoon had suffered thirty percent casualties, with the second squad being nearly all killed, the third having lost two men, and the first, which had passed through the locks last, almost untouched. So much for the walkover theory. If this was the Academy's idea of easy, it was a wonder that anyone survived to graduate.

A hand touched Kyle's arm. He turned to find a medic standing beside him. He had a blaster burn along one side of his helmet and other people's blood on his arms. "How 'bout the Rebs, sir? Give 'em aid or put 'em out of their misery"

Kyle knew what ninety-nine percent of his fellow officers would say put them out of their misery. He couldn't bring himself to give the order though – not in cold blood. He looked around. The floor was littered with bodies. "Our people come first, the Rebels after that. Military intelligence will want to interrogate the prisoners."

The medic nodded respectfully and hurried off to inform his team. Hong appeared, removed his helmet, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Hong wore his hair high and tight but allowed himself a carefully tended mustache. If he was worried he gave no sign of it. Kyle wasn't absolutely sure, but he thought he saw respect in the other man's eyes, and felt some pride trickle into his chest. He realized that in spite of the fact that the fear remained crouched in his belly, he controlled it, instead of the other way around. The cadet removed his helmet and held it in the crook of his arm.

"So, Sergeant Major, our instructors taught us that when things go south, and we need advice, we should ask for it. What do you think? Should we pull out? Or press ahead?"

Hong's already high estimation of the young officer's

ability went up a notch. He knew from sad experience that nine out of ten of Kyle's peers would have been too proud to ask for advice.

"I say we call for reinforcements, then press ahead, sir. The Rebs have got to be hurting, and I'd hate to use up even more lives breaking in all over again."

The advice made sense and served to validate Kyle's instincts. He nodded, chose the correct tac frequency, and spoke into his wrist com. "C-1 to R-1. Over."

He heard the crackle of static followed by the pilot's voice. The signal was scrambled in both directions.

"R-1 here - go. Over."

"I need a sitrep, One - any activity out there? Over."

"The Rebs sent some coded comm traffic, C-1 - and I've got a feeling they have backup on the way. Over."

Kyle winced at his own stupidity. He'd been so scared, so stupid, that he'd forgotten the commlink "Grease the antenna, R-1 - and tell the Imperator to send some reinforcements. We took thirty percent casualties getting into this place, and there's no end in sight. Acknowledge. Over."

"Burn the link and call for backup," the pilot said calmly. "Got it. Hang in there, C-1. Out."

Kyle looked at Hong. "All right, Sergeant Major. Enough goofing off. Move 'em out."

Hong grinned, popped a salute, and did an about-face. "Okay, people, you heard the Cadet Leader, let's finish what we started. First squad first, third squad second, second squad hold."

The few surviving members of the second squad, most of whom were wounded, watched dully as their comrades entered a large underground passageway. Three heavily armed troopers led the phalanx, with Kyle and Hong immediately behind.

The corridor was wide enough to accommodate heavy equipment, and the walls bore the marks left by the mole miner used to create it, plus some not very original graffiti regarding the Emperor. Blood left by the wounded and two



widely separated bodies gave mute testimony to the fact that the Rebels had suffered heavy casualties as well.

Side tunnels branched left and right. Some of them could accommodate humans, while many couldn't. The function of the passageways wasn't clear, and Kyle didn't care, as long as the Rebels didn't launch an attack from one of them. He sent scouts down the larger ones and waited for the all clear before continuing on. A quiet trip mostly, the silence broken only by their footsteps and the sound of his own breathing.

So it went for a kilometer or so, until the ground shook, and Kyle heard a loud cracking sound through his external commlink. It came from behind and the cadet turned in tune to see the tunnel collapse.

Suddenly, without knowing how he knew, Kyle glimpsed the future. Where the well-lit corridor had been he saw only darkness and the flash of energy weapons.

The words tumbled out of his mouth. "Hit the dirt! Low crawl forward!"

The orders made no apparent sense, but if the Imperial stormtroopers knew anything, it was how to obey orders, and they did so to a man. Kyle's vision, and the resulting order, saved many of their lives.

The moment the lights went out, the Rebels opened fire through hastily drilled holes. The fire, most of which passed over the stormtroopers' heads, splashed against the opposite wall. Kyle, knowing a frontal attack was on the way, elbowed forward. They needed cover, any kind of cover, if they hoped to survive. His helmet light wobbled across the back end of a much-abused crawler, and the alternating black and yellow stripes that covered the bumper.

"Take cover behind the crawler! Prepare to engage!"

The words were no sooner out of Kyle's mouth than the Rebels dropped grenades through the weapon apertures. The explosions came two seconds apart and were followed by the screams of wounded men.

Hong, his voice harsh, remonstrated those who cried out.

"The tac frequency is intended for verbal communication. Use it that way."

It seemed as if the mission had turned into an unending nightmare, where everything that could happen did happen, and was immediately followed by something even worse.

The lights flashed on and the stormtroopers fired as a wall-to-wall line of droids rolled, hopped, glided, and lurched in their direction. Kyle recognized a pair of heavy-duty construction droids, a spidery freight loader, two A-types, and a forlorn R2 unit, all condemned to an electromechanical suicide mission. None of the machines were armed, or programmed for combat, but they were bulky and provided cover for the Rebels behind them.

Blaster bolts flashed out and struck stormtroopers where they lay. One of them tried to stand and staggered as the Rebs cut him down. The range was short, too short to fire grenades safely, but Kyle saw no alternative.

"Grenades! Front and rear."

The robots staggered and came apart as the grenades exploded around them. A stormtrooper's head flew off. Blood sprayed upward. No longer protected, the Rebels fired, and backed away. Furious, the surviving stormtroopers stood and met fire with fire. The Rebs turned and ran. The Imperials continued to fire. The sight made Kyle sick, and he was just about to order the firing to stop when the last man fell. His body skidded all the way to the durasteel door.

Kyle had given up all hope of capturing the facility. He had to focus on salvaging what remained of his first command. Anal there wasn't much to save. The platoon was down to Sergeant Major Hong, twelve effectives, and two walking wounded. A retreat was unrealistic. To backtrack they'd have to pass the weapons slots, and, assuming they made it all the way to the cave in, tons of rock blocked the way. No, their single remaining hope was to blow the door, and search for another way out. Unless reinforcements had arrived – which would change everything.

Kyle called R-1, heard nothing but static, and tried again.

Same result. Maybe the additional thickness of rock had blocked his signal, maybe the assault boat had been forced to leave, or maybe just about anything. It hardly mattered. All he could do was work with the information at hand and hope for the best.

Kyle looked at Hong. "There's no going back, Sergeant Major. Tell the men to scavenge for power paks – drag the droids forward – and blow the door."

Hong nodded soberly. "Yes, sir. They're gonna be waiting for us, sir."

Kyle nodded as he surveyed the rough-hewn walls, the blood-splattered floor, and the remains of his first command. The strange part was that the mission had been far worse than even his worst imaginings – yet the fear had disappeared.

Kyle looked around and saw that his men had taken up positions to either side of the door, while Corporal Givens placed a magnetic demo charge against the control panel. Givens made one last adjustment to the charge and turned. "Any time, sir."

Kyle nodded. "Thank you, Givens. Spread out, men, stay low, and prepare to fire. They'll be waiting for us. And remember – make every shot count. Power paks are getting hard to come by."

Except for the droids small enough to drag forward, there wasn't a whole lot of cover in the passageway. Still, the Imperials took advantage of what there was, and Kyle gave the order. The blast blew the control panel out of the wall. Sparks arced, an electrical fire started, and the door whirled open.

The Rebs were waiting all right, and opened up with everything they had. A barricade of sorts had been erected and the usual odd assortment of men, women, and aliens had taken refuge behind a makeshift wall of cargo modules, cable reels, and furniture.

Kyle noticed as he aimed and fired that these particular Rebels seemed less disciplined than those they had encountered before. Some had a tendency to fire in a wild,

undisciplined manner, others carried second-rate weapons, and at least two or three were frozen in place. Were they noncombatants then? Men and women who had been pressed into service out of desperation? They had numbers on their side, however, plus much better cover. Three of his troopers died and the rest moved forward. The Rebels held for a moment, wavered in the face of incoming fire, and broke.

The stormtroopers continued to fire and Kyle knew he couldn't allow a massacre. His voice boomed over the command channel. "That's enough hold your fire."

Hong turned in Kyle's direction. Even though he couldn't see the noncom's expression, the cadet could sense the frown on his face. Kyle found an excuse and ran it out. "We need to conserve our ammo, Sergeant Major. Most of the stuff the Rebs left won't do us any good. Come to think of it – let's use their oxygen for a while."

Hong nodded and turned away. Kyle gave a sigh of relief, waved the men forward, and followed the handwritten signs. They read "Comm Center" and led him past what smelled like a cafeteria, a series of cavelike storage rooms, down a businesslike corridor. The rough-hewn walls supported an electronic message board and a hodge-podge of printouts. One announced a birthday party for someone named Blim Shahr, and another cautioned base personnel to conserve on water.

Kyle surprised himself by having the presence of mind to scan the bulletins with the tiny battle holocam built into his helmet. The military intelligence geeks would be thrilled, and, in the unlikely event that he survived, the instructors would award him some extra mission points. Collateral documentation was just one of the thousand things an infantry officer was supposed to remember and take care of.

A maintenance droid chose that particular moment to poke its nose out of a side passage, saw the Imperials, and gave a squeak of alarm. The droid had already engaged reverse gear, and was in the process of backing away when

an energy bolt splashed the rock behind it. Hong's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"Thanks, Dendu. You wasted a shot and missed the target. The Emperor would be proud."

A pair of light-duty doors blocked the way. They rolled into the walls at Kyle's approach. He prepared to fire but saw nothing more threatening than some gray equipment racks. Moving cautiously, weapons at the ready, the troopers entered the room, turned to the right, and were confronted by an amazing sight.

The Rebels, about fifteen or twenty of them, stood with their backs to a wall full of monitors and related communications gear with their hands in the air. Kyle, who was ready for anything but a surrender, struggled to cope. He checked to make sure the Rebs were covered, removed his helmet, and used his forearm to smear the sweat across his brow. What would he do with prisoners? They outnumbered his team and would be difficult to herd around. No, the more expedient solution was to kill them, trash the control room, and get out while the getting was good. Especially with more Rebels on the way.

As Kyle considered the feasibility of what amounted to mass murder, his eyes drifted across an oval-shaped face. Something, he would never know exactly what, caught his attention. The girl was about his age, perhaps a little younger, dressed in a flight suit. She had dark brown eyes that matched the color of her hair and seemed to draw him in. It was peaceful there, yet centered, as if her whole being was focused on something he couldn't see.

At that precise moment, a spark leapt the gap between them, and she, like the first person he had killed, crossed the line from variable to person. Not only that – Kyle knew she had experienced something as well. He could tell from the way her eyes widened. He felt his heart beat a tiny bit faster. He knew then that he couldn't kill this young woman – or the others, either.

Sergeant Major Hong brought Kyle back to the present. His voice came over the command frequency.

"Look! Up on that monitor, sir! I don't know who that ship belongs to, but it ain't one of ours. Let's grease the Rebs and get the heck out of here!"

Kyle looked, saw a freighter settle into place, and watched dust shoot upward as a ramp touched the ground. It didn't take a genius to now that Reb reinforcements were on the way. His voice was surprisingly strong, and because his helmet was off, the prisoners heard it too.

"Negative on greasing the Rebs, Sergeant Major. There's been enough killing today."

Hong turned. Even though the cadet couldn't see his eyes through the visor, he could feel their intensity. The voice was like steel. "With all due respect, sir, the Rebs wasted two-thirds of your command, and will kill even more of our troops if you let them go."

Kyle shook his head. "The answer is no. You heard my orders, carry them out."

Hong nodded stiffly. "Yes, sir. Under protest, sir. Jonsey, pull the gory nuds from the transmitters, Haku, set some charges. We don't have much time."

Kyle looked at the monitor, saw space-suited Rebs flooding out of the freighter's cargo hatch, and wondered how R-1 had fared. Had the assault boat escaped? Were Imperial reinforcements on the way? The questions were academic as far as he was concerned. If he survived the next few hours – and that was a mighty big if- he'd be court-martialed for allowing the Rebs to live. A punishment he very likely deserved.

Kyle looked at the girl, saw the thanks in her eyes, and nodded. She at least was well worth saving. The helmet smelled of sweat as he pulled it over his head. "All right, men, clear the room, and let's find a place to hole up. Reinforcements are on the way."

Kyle had no idea if his words were true. But he knew the men needed to hear them. He waved the Rebs to the far end of the room, waited for his team to back out through the door, and followed. The moment they were clear, he yelled "Detonate the charges! Follow me!" and sprinted down the

hall. He felt rather than heard the explosions. The Rebs had plenty of time to take cover and he hoped they had. Especially the girl.

For reasons he wasn't entirely sure of, Kyle had identified the cafeteria as the best place to hole up. He skidded to a stop, stuck his head around the door, and confirmed the room was empty. "All right, men, stack some furniture in front of that door, and check for exits. It's time for lunch."

The joke got a chuckle as Kyle had hoped that it would, the stormtroopers stacked tables against the door, and secured the air conditioning ducts. Once that was accomplished, he allowed them to take turns ransacking the coolers, and offered an overnight pass to the trooper who made the most outrageous sandwich.

They even made one for Kyle, and the Cadet Leader had removed his helmet to eat it when a crawler-mounted drill bit broke through the back wall. Kyle barely had time to pull his helmet back on before Rebs poured through the hole and opened fire on the stormtroopers. Hong and four or five more died within the first five seconds of combat. Kyle swore, turned, and fired. Something hit his helmet, he fell, and darkness rose all around him.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Kyle walked out through the main entrance of the hospital, blinked in the harsh sunlight produced by Carida's sun, and returned an enlisted man's salute. Stone neks crouched to either side of the entryway, each large enough to swallow an assault boat, symbolic of the Empire's strength. He started down the long flight of stairs. A metal railing separated downward bound pedestrians from those coming up.

Consistent with the Emperor's disdain for other sentient species, and his not-so-subtle discrimination against women, most were both human and male.

The Imperial Military Training Base on Carida was home to more than one hundred and fifty thousand recruits, cadets, and instructors. The Military Academy, also known as Cliffside due to the dropoff along the east side of the parade ground, took up less than one-tenth of the sprawling base, but produced a high percentage of the Empire's officer corps.

The hospital, which had been busy to begin with, was even more so thanks to the steady trickle of casualties from missions like Kyle's. The cadet fell in behind some med techs and was halfway to the quad when someone hollered his name and grabbed his arm.

The voice had a nasal quality. It had followed him nearly every day of the last four years. It belonged to Nathan Donar III, eldest son to Governor Donar II, and a real pain in



the posterior. Beady brown eyes regarded Kyle from above a long thin nose. They were filled with false bonhomie.

"Rimmer! How's the noggin? Good to see you up and around!"

Kyle pulled his arm free, waved an acknow-ldgment, and continued on his way. Faces blurred as more congratulations came his way. It seemed as if everyone had heard the story. There were various versions but all of them had common elements.

The Cadet Leader had encountered unexpectedly heavy opposition, and, rather than turn back as any normal person would do, had fought his way through the corridors of a major Rebel inst allation, killing no less than four hundred and thirty-six insur-rectionists and disabling an important communi-cations installation. All of which Kyle knew to be a greatly exaggerated account of what actually happened. And the last part of the story he only knew secondhand.

It seemed that two Rebel ships had arrived shortly after he'd been knocked unconscious, loaded the surviving staff, and lifted off. The first vessel made it, but the second fell victim to reinforcements summoned by R1, and was completely destroyed. A force of heavily armed commandos had swept through the Rebel base and found Kyle and the six remaining members of his original force. All were wounded and crouched behind a hastily built barricade.

To Kyle, this seemed a clear indication of his failure. No one would listen to his objections, however, least of all the great General Mohc, who had appeared at Kyle's bedside two days ago and commended the cadet for his bravery.

Later that evening, over dinner with Jerec, Mohc mentioned the young cadet's exploits. Jerec, his empty eye sockets hidden behind a band of black, looked up from his half-cooked meat. He couldn't see what the meal looked like but could smell the residue of blood.

"I knew the boy's father. His life was wasted. Perhaps the boy will be different. I'd like to meet him."

Mohc nodded, remembered that his guest was blind, and

replied out loud. "It shall be as you say."

Jerec, who saw more than Mohc could imagine, smiled and dabbed at his lips. The meal was delicious.

Kyle, who had no knowledge that such deliberations had taken place, left the stairs. The large open area in front of him was referred to as "the quad" on the interactive maps issued to visitors, but the cadets called it "the grinder." How many hours – how many days had he spent marching back and forth across these acres of fused stone? He wasn't sure. The main thing he remembered was the mindbending fatigue that stemmed from endless physical training, long hours of study, and intentional sleep deprivation. All that was behind him now, with graduation only hours away.

The thought brought guilt, but he pushed it away. No one else cared about the truth. Why should he?

Kyle took the most direct route across the grinder, a path that took him through the shadow cast by a heroic statue of Emperor Palpatine.

A column of underclassmen double timed through the space in front of Kyle and their leader snapped a salute in the senior's direction. He returned it, and in doing so, felt inexplicably happy. Somehow, against all odds, he had survived the mission and the commission would be his. His father would be proud, he would find a way to make up for his past mistakes, and everything would be fine. The thought put a spring in his step and Kyle quick marched toward the dorms.

Behind the cadet, so high up that the movement was lost from the ground, a pair of electromechanical eyes blinked open and added one more image to the hundreds available on the video mosaic that filled an entire wall of the Commandant's underground office. The cadets were a mischievous lot. It was a good idea to keep an eye on them.

Graduation day dawned bright and cold. Light streamed in through the curtainless windows and splashed across the synthetic floor. Kyle rolled out of bed, stretched, yawned, realized that the bad dreams had taken the night off, and

took pleasure in the fact that his vision was clear.

Meek Odom, Kyle's roommate, was still asleep. Kyle grinned, said, "Hey dinko breath! Time to get up!" and kicked the other cadet's rack. Having elicited the usual response, an oath accompanied by a flying pillow, Kyle headed for the shower. He, like those he met in the hall, was in a jubilant mood. An inspection, another march in the hot sun, and some boring speeches. That was all that stood between them and the commissions they had worked so hard to achieve.

The next few hours were consumed by an orgy of pressing, dressing, and shining, all followed by a preinspection inspection, and a lecture on deportment. Once that was out of the way, the cadets assembled in front of their dorm and marched to the quad.

A team of maintenance workers, freshmen, and droids had worked through the night to erect temporary grandstands, pylons from which gaily colored pennants flew, along with all manner of bunting, battle flags, and regimental heraldry. It made an impressive and heart stirring sight, as did the endless ranks of infantry, plus the company of imperial walkers, which included four gigantic AT-Ats, and four of the smaller but no less intimidating AT-STs.

Yes, the sight of all that military might, combined with Palpatine's statue, the marches played by the Regimental Band, and the roar produced by wave after wave of rooftop-skimming TIE fighters made each cadet's spine a tiny bit straighter, brought smiles to the faces of parents fortunate enough, and wealthy enough, to attend in person, and, when played as part of the heavily censored evening news, would serve to reassure the billions of Imperial citizens who, willingly or unwillingly, accepted the Emperor's rule.

Kyle's thoughts were elsewhere, however, focused as they were on the back in front of him, and the absolute necessity of staying in step. Especially since graduation from Cliffside involved one final test, a tradition that had emerged with the Empire itself, and had resulted in more than thirty-six deaths.

The test started with a turn to the right, and the long march around the west end of the quad, past the grandstand at the foot of the hospital stairs, past the platform on which General Mohc and a cluster of senior officers stood, past the imposing administration building and the bronze mantigrues that guarded its doors, and straight for the five-hundred-foot drop from which the academy had taken its unofficial name.

It was a challenge that the cadets had faced countless times during the last four years – and successfully – except for one critical fact. True to tradition, and with safety in mind, they had never faced the abyss itself. During drills, while practicing for this critical moment, a bright yellow line had been used to represent the edge of the dropoff, and like most of his fellow cadets, Kyle could remember what it felt like to stumble, trip, or fall over that symbolic cliff.

The difference was that the consequence for those mistakes consisted of a tongue-lashing followed by fifty pushups, whereas for the real thing, a poorly phrased order, a lack of teamwork, or a moment of lost concentration could result in death.

The cadets had spent untold hours arguing over the matter of placement and the relative risks attendant to each position. Each column consisted of four men abreast. Thanks to his medium height, and position in the alphabet, Kyle had been assigned to the sixth rank on the right flank.

While most of his peers felt that this position was not as risky as a slot in the first rank, any placement on the right flank was iffy, as they would skirt the edge of the cliff after the column arrived at the southeast corner of the parade ground and wheeled left.

This was judgment Kyle knew to be true since he had gone to the trouble to research the matter three months before and discovered that of the thirty six cadets who had fallen to their deaths, fully sixteen had marched on the right flank.

Nathan Donar, who, for reasons transparent to everyone except his toadies, had been given the temporary rank of Cadet Company Commander, marched next to the inside

flank and would make the critical call.

Kyle watched the administration building pass through the corner of his eye, quickly followed by the engineering complex, and knew the turn was coming up. Three previous companies had completed the evolution successfully, or so he assumed, but what if Donar'd a mistake? What if his voice froze, like what's-his-name – Stor's – had three years previously? The entire front rank had marched off the edge as straight as you please, and the whole bunch of them would have followed if Stor hadn't croaked the word "halt," and reformed the company. The fact that he subsequently took the plunge solo was regarded as unfortunate but fitting. It was held up as an illustration of courage, obedience, and responsibility.

Was it all those things? Or was it just plain stupidity? Kyle had never been able to make up his mind. Kyle, who thought he had mastered his fear on the asteroid, felt liquid lead trickle into the pit of his stomach and swallowed the lump in his throat.

Donar, conscious of the fact that his mother and father were watching from the grandstand, and that he had an almost overwhelming urge to pee, did his best to penetrate the glare. The trick was to issue the order at exactly the right moment so that the column wheeled, the right flank skimmed the edge of the abyss, and the crowd, their eyes glued to the video provided by hovering camera droids, received the expected thrill.

To aid in the task, and thereby ensure his success, Donar had taken the rather sensible precaution of placing a small self-adhesive disk at the precise point where the turn should begin. This was not in keeping with the Academy's traditions, perhaps. But it was consistent with his father's oft-repeated advice, "Only suckers take chances." Words to live by. The only trouble was that he couldn't see the marker. Was it there? And hidden by the glare? Or had some well-intentioned main-tenance droid removed it during the night?

There was no way to know, which meant the Cadet

Commander had to do it the hard way. He gulped, forced himself to wait for what he judged to be the last possible moment, and gave the order. "Company! Left turn, march!"

Kyle heard the order, felt the men on his left go into the turn, and took slightly longer steps. The abyss beckoned, came closer, then stabilized. He sensed that a third of his foot was over the edge each time it hit the pavement. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the next order came. "Company! Left turn, march!"

Nothing had ever felt so good as the moment when the company wheeled left and started down the quad's north side. By the time they had completed their circuit and taken up their position in front of the VIP platform, the rest of the cadets had "walked the edge" without casualties.

The fear associated with the abyss quickly turned to boredom as the Commandant introduced the first in a long list of guest speakers, the last of whom was General Mohc. He had a bulldog face, barrel chest, and relatively short frame. He at least was a real soldier and worthy of their attention. His speech was short and to the point.

"The Emperor spent more than a half-million credits to feed, house, and educate each one of you over the past four years. Not because he thought it would be the nice thing to do or because he likes military parades, but because he wants you to defend the Empire. An Empire which has been attacked from within.

"That's your job. To find the rot, cut it out, and restore order. Not the chaos that flows from a thousand voices demanding a thousand different things, but the consistency that flows from a single, well-conceived plan. The best plan. The right plan. The Emperor's plan. Thank you. And congratulations on your accomplishment."

The next part of the ceremony was extremely important to some of the cadets – those in the top ten percent of the class – and less so to everyone else. In spite of the fact that Kyle had worked hard to make the Commandant's honor roll, he felt ambivalent about being recognized for it. It was as if the mission, and the killing that had been part of it,

made everything else seem meaningless.

The Commandant read a list of names and accomplishments over the PA system, while General Mohc, together with a man in a black robe, made their way through the ranks. Though he was not permitted to turn his head from the eyes-forward position, Kyle had excellent peripheral vision, and used it to monitor their progress.

Mohc looked like what he was, an officer who followed orders, no matter how unpleasant they might be. No, it was the other man who held Kyle's eye, who sent a chill down his spine. Why? What was it about the figure in black that he found so frightening? He wasn't sure. The cadet, already at attention, stiffened even more as the men approached. Kyle heard his name boom over the public address system, accepted the honor baton that Mohc handed him, and was surprised to hear his name for a second time.

"And, in recognition for his valor, and bravery in the face of the enemy, the Emperor hereby presents Second Lieutenant Kyle Katarn with the Medal of Valor, as well as the Empire's heartfelt gratitude."

In spite of the noonday sun, Kyle felt the air grow chilly as the other man stepped forward. A hood hung in folds around the hard angles of his face. A narrow strip of black leather obscured the place where his eyes should have been. A tracery of black tattoos swirled away from the corners of his downturned mouth. His voice was as soft as the flutter of bird's wings, yet loud enough to be heard.

"My name is Jerec. Greetings, Kyle Katarn. You have accomplished a great deal for one so young. Recognition is sweet, is it not? However, remember that recognition is a gift given by those who have power to those who don't. This is but the first step. Climb the ladder swiftly, join those who possess power, and claim what is yours. I will be waiting."

Hands touched his chest, the medal clicked against the magnetic bar sewn into the front of his uniform, and Kyle staggered as power surged through his nervous system. Not from Jerec, but from some place deep within, as if it had been hidden there all along.

For one brief moment Kyle “saw” the entire parade ground as if from above, including the Emperor’s statue, the ranks of cadets, a wind-driven food wrapper, and a column of insects foraging for food.

Kyle “heard” the PA, the beating of his own heart, and a tiny almost infinitesimal “click” as the second hand on General Mohc’s analog style chrono advanced to the next position. Kyle “felt” the power of Jerec’s mind, understood the extent of his all-consuming hunger, and knew nothing would be allowed to stand between this man and what he wanted. Then Jerec stepped back, the connection snapped, and Kyle was left swaying as if in the wind, his nerves crackling as the final ergs of energy discharged through them.

The rest of the ceremony passed in a haze as Kyle tried to understand what had happened. Why would Jerec say the things he had? Were the words meant to be polite? Or was the invitation genuine? Did it mean what he thought it might? That he could rise to a position similar to Jerec’s? And would he want such a thing even if it were possible?

The ceremony ended as it always had, with three cheers for the Emperor, caps tossed into the air, and mass pandemonium as the class was dismissed. Meek Odom appeared out of nowhere, grabbed Kyle around the waist, and lifted him off the ground. Other cadets, eager to see and touch his medal, crowded around. Then, their curiosity satisfied, they headed for the stands where friends and family waited, or back to the dorms, where, assuming they’d been invited, they would prepare for the usual rounds of dinners, dances, and parties. Kyle, like the rest of the rimmers in the class, had been snubbed.

Odom, sensitive to his friend’s predicament, threw an arm over his shoulders. “Time to go, Mope face, assuming you’re willing to consort with peasants, what with your medal and all. Who’s the guy in black anyway? A snappy dresser he ain’t.”

Kyle had to laugh in spite of himself. “Beats me – called himself Jerec for whatever that’s worth. Some kind of



government official or something.”

Odom shrugged. “Whatever. My parents have invited you to dinner. Something about meeting a hero. As though my assault on a deserted weapons factory had no value whatsoever. The nerve of these people!”

Kyle dragged his friend to a halt. “Cut the phobium, Meek. Your parents don’t want me. They want you. As well they should. I’ll take a rain check.”

Odom had a square face, dark, nearly black skin, and a perpetual grin. “Negative on that, O decorated one. Are you coming peaceably? Or shall I drag you?”

Kyle looked, saw the determination in his friend’s eyes, and smiled. “Will your sister be there?”

Odom laughed. “Be careful what you ask for, Katarn – you might just get it!”

The evening went well. Unlike so many of the Empire’s wealthier families, the Odoms had no ties to the Emperor, and were genuinely nice. Meek’s mother ran a small but successful import-export business, and his father was a celebrated architect. They, and their stunning daughter, were splendid hosts and the evening passed with surprising speed.

Finally, so full of good food that Kyle thought he might burst, the cadets returned to the dorm. What with the lifting of their curfew, and the MPs ignoring anything short of total mayhem, there were the predictable number of drunks both pleasant and less so.

The young men dodged the worst of the crazies and made it to their room without major mishap. Kyle had rid himself of his mess jacket, and removed most of his shirt studs, when he noticed that a message icon had appeared in the upper left-hand corner of his computer screen. It blinked with annoying regularity. He almost delayed reading it till morning, certain that it was one of the “Dear Cadet” bulletins that the Commandant loved to issue, but noticed Meek’s screen was blank.

Curious, Kyle dropped into his chair, entered his access code, and waited for the message to appear.

The words "Receipt Sent" appeared first, followed by the message itself.

"The Emperor regrets to inform you that your father, Morgan Katarn, was killed during a Rebel raid. No further information is available at this time. If you wish to speak with a therapist one will be made available upon request. To apply for compassionate leave select 'Cadet Initiated Administrative Requests' from the main menu and press 'enter.' Choose 'Compassionate Leave,' provide the appropriate information, and attach this message."

Kyle read the words three times before they acquired meaning. Then, sure that the whole thing was part of a cruel hoax perpetrated by one or more of his classmates, he looked for the authentication code that should appear across the bottom of the screen. Tears sprang to his eyes when he saw it. Morgan Katarn, his father, mentor, and best friend, was dead. Killed by the Rebels. Why? Why would they want to kill Morgan Katarn? Especially in light of the fact that his father was sympathetic to the Rebel cause, too sympathetic in Kyle's opinion, and had only reluctantly approved his application to the Academy. It didn't make sense. But nothing about war did, including the fact that he had survived while the rest of his team were killed.

Kyle remembered the Comm Center, the Rebels standing with their hands in the air, and knew he had committed a grievous error. Hong had been right. He should have given the order, should have killed every single one of them, should have left a room full of bodies. For the team, for his father, for himself.

Kyle stood, left a note on Meck's nightstand, and headed for the Office of Cadet Affairs. He'd be there when it opened. Maybe they'd have more information, maybe they'd make sense of it, or maybe it was a horrible misunderstanding. Yes, an error that could and would be resolved.

It was cold on the grinder. Moonlight caressed Palpatine's statue and threw darkness across the quad. Kyle, his thoughts as black as space itself, followed.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

The *Star of Empire* was more than two kilometers long and equipped to carry five thousand passengers in addition to her considerable crew. The sole property of Haj Shipping Lines, she, like the rest of the company's ships, was a durasteel testament to the family's ability to court favor with the Emperor, while simultaneously maintaining a positive relationship with the burgeoning Alliance.

"Let others play at politics - we're in the shipping business," old man Haj liked to say, and, thanks to their cheerful neutrality, the clan prospered as a result.

All of which had nothing to do with Kyle, but everything to do with the *Star's* diverse passenger list. After hitching a ride on a military transport, Kyle made his way from the Academy on Carida to the orbital transfer station off Dorlon II, where he and a variety of other sentients boarded a well-appointed shuttle.

Now, as Kyle sipped a complimentary glass of wine and watched the *Star* fill the viewport, he found himself shoulder to tentacle with a Twi'lek merchant, a Mon Calamari engineer, a pair of Klatooinian technicians, a Rodian bounty hunter, a Gran of indeterminate profession, and some other species of which he was none too certain. They, plus a variety of specially adapted humanoids, all manner of relatives, bonds beings, and droids made for a cosmopolitan crowd. Quite a change after four years on Carida where nonhumans were rarely seen, much less encountered.

The liner sparkled with decorative lights, her enormous hangar bay yawned to accept them, and the shuttle seemed to drift forward. Kyle admired the precision with which the retros were fired and wondered if he could do as well. He doubted that he could. Practice makes perfect, and he, like all the rest of the Academy's engineering students, had less flight time than he would've liked. Space-suited crew waited to receive them, droids criss-crossed the deck on various errands, and smaller ships, many of which were the personal property of wealthy passengers, squalled in orderly rows.

It was an impressive sight, considerably different from the Carida-bound freighter he had ridden four years before. It took half an hour to close and pressurize the bay and disembark the shuttle's passengers. Those who could afford first-class accommodations were greeted by members of the *Star's* eternally solicitous crew and escorted to their various staterooms. Sentients only slightly less fortunate were met by one of the ship's identical purser droids and shown to their smaller but still respectable cabins.

Thanks to the generosity and political savvy of the Haj family, Kyle and a handful of other military personnel were entitled to reduced fares, a thoughtful gesture which pleased the Empire's senior officers.

They carried their own luggage as they were herded through a maze of halls, corridors, and tubeways until they arrived on the euphemistically named Starlight Deck, where none of the accommodations had a viewport and the drive chambers were only a bulkhead away.

Kyle had a cubicle-like cabin all to himself, however, which seemed palatial when compared to four years in a shared room. It took less than an hour to take a shower, unpack his gear, and check the terminal. He scanned the ship's layout and settled on the Observation Deck as the most logical destination for someone as poor as he. Unlike many of the restaurants and clubs, it was free, and according to the continually refreshed text, an excellent spot from which to get another look at Dorlon II.

He left the cubicle, checked to make sure the door was locked, and bumped into a Navy rating. They exchanged salutes, nodded to each other, and went their separate ways. Officers didn't fraternize with enlisted people – not openly anyway – and both knew the rules.

It took a while to make his way from the Starlight Deck to the Observation Deck via narrow passageways, crowded lifts, and moving sidewalks. Kyle didn't mind, though, since sentient watching was one of his favorite hobbies, and there were plenty to watch – especially the girls. Having just spent four years in a mostly male environment, Kyle was fascinated by them. So much so that he forgot himself for a moment and didn't realize how obvious he was until the twins he was ogling pointed in his direction, giggled, and said something to their mother. She aimed a frown at the officer, he tripped over his feet, and the girls laughed.

Kyle's face was bright red as they all entered the observation salon. Thanks to the fact that the area was packed with standing, sitting, reclining, and even squatting sentients, it was easy to get lost in the crowd.

Though different species exhibited a wide variety of behaviors, abilities, and preferences, Kyle had observed that almost all of those equipped with even the most rudimentary organs of sight enjoyed gazing at planets. It didn't matter which planet since, like rocks on a beach, each had its own special kind of beauty.

In fact, there was something about the experience of looking at something so huge, so majestic, that transcended the barriers of species and bound the viewers together. This was such a moment, and while some were engaged in quiet conversation, the vast majority were silent, their attention focused on what lay beyond the transparisteel bubble.

Kyle saw a vast sphere, its surface blackened where volcanoes had spewed ash and lava, gradually giving way to tans, yellows, and a dusting of what looked like powdered sugar where sulfur compounds dominated the soil.

Others, those who were limited to the gray scale, or beings who had the capacity to detect infrared emanations, saw

different but no less impressive sights, each according to his, her, or its abilities.

Kyle winced as an all-too-familiar voice sounded from behind him. "Rimmer? Didn't know you were booked aboard the *Star* – could have offered you a lift. Family yacht you know – safely stashed below."

Kyle forced a smile as he turned. "Nathan. What a pleasant surprise. How's the hangover?"

Donar, who had consumed too much wine on graduation night and had thrown up all over the inside of a friend's ground car, looked left and right. His drinking was a sore subject where his mother was concerned, and he didn't want another lecture. "Long gone, old Rimmer, long gone. Come now, enough rubbernecking, it's time to meet my parents. In fact, how 'bout lunch? The old man's rather fond of a good feed and we can latch on."

With the single exception of Meek Odom and his family, it was the first time that Kyle had received such an invitation, and in spite of the fact that he knew the gap between Rimmer and the Empire's inner circle to be all but unbridgeable, he couldn't help feeling complimented. Besides, what with Nathan dragging him through the crowd, and his parents already in sight, there was no way to refuse.

Nasal though it was, Nathan's voice was loud, and cut through the noise. "Mother . . . Father . . . look who I ran into? I'd like you to meet Kyle Katarn – you know, the cadet who won the medal."

Although the honorable Madame Donar looked pleasant if somewhat emaciated, Nathan's father, Dol Donar II, Governor of Derra IV, was something else again. He was an imposing man, as portly as his wife was thin, with eyes like twin turbolasers, and three chins. His clothing, which shimmered with reflected light, hung in great folds, as if to conceal his weight. He regarded Kyle with a look akin to an entomologist examining a brand-new specimen. The words, as nasal as his son's, came like jabs.

"Decorated, you say? When? Why?"

Nathan, who was used to his father's style, was quick to explain. "During the graduation ceremony – for valor on a Rebel-held asteroid."

The Governor extended a beefy hand. Kyle noticed that he wore a pinkie ring set with what must have been a five karat Rol Stone. It sparkled with light. "Of course. Silly of me to forget! Congratulations, son. A medal of valor is something to be proud of."

"As was your son's leadership during the graduation ceremony," Kyle replied tactfully. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for his judgment."

The older man smiled and put an arm around Nathan's shoulders. "It was something to see, I can tell you that! You lads did a fine job. Scared the heck out of his mother, though."

Nathan, who lived to earn his father's respect, turned pink with pleasure and chattered nonstop through the subsequent lunch. The Nebula Room was one of the most expensive restaurants onboard. Kyle, who could have subsisted for a week on the food Governor Donar consumed during that single meal, settled for a green salad, a freshly baked scone, a serving of runyip stew, and then, because he couldn't resist, a bowl of candied insects. The dish was a favorite among the Kubaz, and the dessert chef brought it to the table himself.

Kyle had just consumed the last of the sweet-and-sour morsels when Governor Donar turned his way. "So, tell us about your family, son, what line of business are they in?"

Nathan frowned and looked genuinely sorry as Kyle forced himself to look the older man in the eye. "My father was a craftsman – the Rebels murdered him."

The statement was a clear admission of social inferiority, but, rather than showing disdain as Kyle had feared, the Governor was genuinely outraged. "Rebels, you say? Blast their miserable hides! A pox on every one of them!"

Madame Donar, who was well aware of the fact that the sentients seated around them might be Rebels, or Rebel sympathizers, placed a hand on her husband's arm. "Your

voice carries, Dol. Remember where we are."

"I don't care where we are!" Donar declared loudly, ignoring those who turned to stare. "I've said it before, and I'll say it again The only good Rebel is a dead Rebel! Mark my words, son, the Emperor has a thing or two in store for the so-called Alliance, and your father will be revenged."

The way the man said it, the certainty of his expression, all led Kyle to believe that something real lay behind the words. Whatever it was must be awesome indeed if the Empire was to suppress the kind of fanaticism he'd encountered on Asteroid AX-456. He was about to say as much when a well-dressed man approached the table.

He bowed to Madame Donar and turned to her husband. "Madame Donar. Governor. Please allow me to introduce myself. The name is Calrissian, Lando Calrissian, and I hear that you enjoy the occasional game of sabacc."

Madame Donar, whose lunch had consisted of little more than some leaves with berries on them, frowned and tried to establish eye contact with the Governor. It was too late, however, since a gleam had entered his eyes and eagerness colored his voice. "Sabacc, you say? Lando Calrissian? It's a pleasure to meet you, citizen Calrissian. Please allow me to introduce my wife Rissa, my son Nathan, and his friend Kyle Katarn. I'd be glad to join you and your friends, assuming it's a friendly game, consistent with my somewhat limited skills."

Calrissian bowed from the waist. "I expect the game to be extremely friendly. And I sense you are far too modest regarding your skills. The Corellia room, then? About two?"

"The Corellia room at two."

Calrissian nodded to each person seated at the table and walked away. Nathan and his father departed for the Corellia room immediately after lunch, while Madame Donar, who had developed a headache, retired to the family's suite. Kyle thanked them for lunch, promised to visit the game, and went for a walk.

Now, away from the nearly fanatical Imperialism of Carida, and outside the protective bubble that surrounded



the Donar family Kyle began to pick up on the hatred that seethed just below the Empire's surface. There were long hard looks, shoulders that seemed to intentionally bump into his, and comments, some loud enough to hear.

"Imperial scum!" Stormtrooper! "

"Slimeball."

The comments made him embarrassed, angry, and confused all at the same time. Didn't they understand? Didn't they know what the Rebels had done? Surely they couldn't be so stupid. But apparently they were, as occasional bits of graffiti confirmed.

Discouraged, and more than a little depressed, Kyle headed for one place where he felt sure he'd be accepted – the Corellia room. Like all the rest of the world-class public rooms, the Corellia had been decorated with its namesake in mind.

Rather than the transparisteel viewport one might have expected, the outer bulkhead featured a vid screen designed to look like a viewport. The image projected there was so real, so convincing, that if Kyle hadn't known better, he would have sworn the ship was orbiting Corellia herself. That, plus cases filled with Corellian artifacts, and walls hung with Corellian art, gave the space its unique look and feel.

The game was well under way by the time Kyle arrived. It had attracted a good many onlookers. Nathan bade him welcome, as did the Governor, but both were preoccupied. There were twenty-five or thirty beings present, but only four were seated at the game table.

Their cards, dealt by one of the ship's game droids, bore electronically generated images. There were four suits staves, flasks, sabres, and coins. Each could be scrambled through the use of a button located at the lower lefthand corner of the card. And there were various sets of rules, including the Empress Teta Preferred system, Cloud City Casino, Corellian Gambit, and at least one more that Kyle couldn't remember. The simple truth was that he'd never enjoyed games much. He was, he had to admit, a sore loser.

Kyle looked up from the table, and caught a glimpse of a face that looked familiar. Or did it? The face belonged to a girl, and much as he might want to, Kyle didn't know any girls. He stared, but she disappeared behind a pair of head-tailed Twi'leks on the far side of the table. Kyle moved to the left, trying to get a better look at her, and accidentally bumped into a Rodian bounty hunter. It was hard to say which was worse, the alien's body odor, or the cheap cologne he used to conceal. Suddenly, like clouds parting to admit a ray of sunlight, two of the onlookers moved apart. The girl looked his way, their eyes met, and they recognized each other. It was her! The girl from the asteroid!

Kyle saw her eyes widen in surprise, saw an emotion he couldn't quite identify cross her face, and watched her turn away. Without thinking, Kyle followed her as she moved quickly through the crowd.

He told himself that it was her status as a Rebel – that he was doing his duty – but he knew it was something more. He wanted to hurt her, to punish her for everything the Rebels had done. But he wanted to talk with her, too. She had been there on the asteroid, and she might be the only person who could understand the way he felt.

Kyle rounded the table, sidestepped the droid that never seemed to stray very far from Calrissian's side, and lunged for the door. The Rodian bounty hunter, his large purple eyes empty of all expression, watched him go. Outside, Kyle saw little more than a flash of blue as the girl merged onto a moving walkway.

Running to catch up, Kyle dodged, passed, and brushed any number of sentients, murmured "Excuse me" over and over again, kept both eyes on his quarry. Once on the walkway, he moved to the outside lane, passed a businesswoman and her secretarial droid, and broke into a fast walk.

The girl had a significant lead on him by then. She looked back over her shoulder, confirmed that he was there, and walked even faster. Seeing that, Kyle redoubled his efforts, broke into a jog. He failed to notice the tall, nearly

cadaverous man who touched the plug in his right ear, murmured "Waller here – he's on the way," into a commlink and ambled along behind.

The walkway ended, the girl paused long enough for Kyle to get a fix on her, then headed for a lift tube. The young officer pushed his way through the crowd, apologized right and left, and arrived in front of the lift just as it closed.

Kyle pounded on the metal in frustration, ignoring the droid's offer of help, and watched the indicator light. There were two levels below the one he was on, but the second was off limits to passengers, which told him what he needed to know.

The ladderway, which was intended for emergencies and only rarely used, ran parallel to the tube. Kyle touched the panel next to the access door, waited for it to slide out of the way, and stepped inside.

The ladder was designed to accommodate both gravity and null gravity conditions. He clamped his feet against the outside rails and his hands as brakes. The ship's artificial gravity handled the rest. The descent lasted five seconds. His boots hit the next plate the same moment that someone threw a choke hold around his neck. Kyle pried at the arm but found it was useless. He might as well have been trying to bend a durasteel bar. The words warmed the right side of his face.

"So what's the hurry, bucko? What if you fell and broke your neck? What would the Emperor do then?"

Kyle tried to say something, tried to respond, but could only make a gargling sound. Another voice intervened. It was distinctly feminine. "That's enough, Rosco. The passageway is clear. Bring him out."

As if by magic, the choke hold metamorphosed into a wrist-lock. Rosco applied some leverage, and Kyle winced and turned toward the hatch. The girl waited to make sure the officer was still under control, nodded approvingly, and stepped into the passage-way. Kyle, with some encouragement from Rosco, followed.

Rosco was built like a barrel. He had a blond crew cut, fist-

flattened nose, and tiny blue eyes. They sparkled knowingly. "Life sucks, don't it? 'Specially if you're a no-good, slimesucking Imperial parasite."

Kyle, who knew he was being baited, remained silent. His chance would come, or so his unarmed-combat instructor had promised, and patience was the key.

A tall thin man appeared as if out of nowhere and fell in behind them. Kyle realized that while his capture hadn't been planned in advance, it had been coordinated on the fly, and expertly at that. Say what you might about the Rebs, they were competent.

The girl stopped in front of a hatch, entered a series of numbers into the key pad, and waited for the door to open. Kyle caught a glimpse of storeroom shelves, realized his captors had support from at least one member of the ship's crew, and wondered if there were other privileges as well.

The girl stepped aside and Kyle was shoved through the opening. The young officer stumbled, fell, and hit the deck face down. He did a pushup, brought his knees under his torso, and launched a backward kick. His left foot missed but his right made contact with Rosco's knee. Kyle fell, rolled, and scrambled to his feet. Most people would have screamed, grabbed the place where it hurt, and collapsed to the floor. The Rebel wasn't most people. He gave a grunt of surprise, frowned, and was about to retaliate when the girlspoke. "Hold it right there. You asked for that one, Rosco – and learned something in the bargain. The Lieutenant may not look like much, but he took AX 456."

"All the more reason to kill him," Rosco growled. "I had friends on 456."

"And I was stationed there," the girl replied steadily, her eyes locked with Kyle's. "He could have killed us, should have killed us. But he didn' t. That took guts."

Kyle searched her face for the hate, for the evil that had killed his father, and couldn't find it. What he saw were the same calm eyes that had connected with his on the asteroid, the same unwavering determination, and yes, the thing he had hoped for but least expected to see understanding. She

knew the taste of fear, the weight of command, and the horror of defeat.

The thin man cleared his throat. "So? Where does that leave us?"

The girl raised an eyebrow. "What's it going to be, Imperial? You gave me my life. I'll give you yours."

The answer came so easily that Kyle felt a sense of guilt. "I'll take it."

The girl nodded, glanced at the thin man's weapon, and said, "Stow the hardware."

The blaster stayed where it was. "Why should we trust him? The fact that he isn't entirely heartless doesn't qualify him as an ally."

The girl stepped forward and held out her hand. It felt cool and dry. "I'm Jan Ors – and you are?"

"Kyle Katarn."

"Glad to meet you, Kyle. Do I have your word? No funny business so long as we're aboard this ship?"

Kyle nodded soberly. "You have my word."

Rosco gave a grunt of disgust. "And what would that be worth? A Hutt's breakfast?"

Ors ignored him. "All right then, we go our way, and you go yours. Remember, though – my debt's been paid. And all bets are off next time we meet."

Kyle felt a sudden sense of desperation. The girl had told him goodbye. There would be no next time.

The thin man had backed into the passageway and Ors would follow. "Wait – I want to talk to you – to learn more about what happened."

The words sounded lame, terribly lame, but caused the girl to pause. Her eyes softened slightly. "Talk?"

And that's all? You won't attempt to turn me in, or something stupid like that?"

Kyle shook his head. "No. I promise."

"All right," the girl agreed. "We'll talk. But we'll do it in public, where everyone can see. The library. One hour from now."

Kyle nodded. "The library. I'll see you there."

Jan Ors smiled and disappeared.

The ship's library, which was actually a great deal more than that, included millions of books in thousands of languages, all stored electronically. There were interactive virtual-reality games, tutorials, and much, much more. Because of the fact that most of the materials could be accessed remotely, or copied into data pads, the facility occupied relatively little space.

Perhaps it was the library's size, or the time of day, but the first thing Kyle noticed was that it was relatively empty. Oh, there were people all right, but no more than a dozen or so, most of whom were lost in whatever text or scenario their scanners were playing, or in one case – a Rodian – seemingly asleep in a cubicle.

Given the fact that Kyle was early, he didn't expect to see Jan, and was surprised when he did. The raised area, intended for readings, was small but adequate for a single performer. Kyle looked around, found no one to take his cues from, and took one of five empty seats.

In spite of the fact that he couldn't see whatever it was that she saw, or hear the music that so clearly moved her, he knew pure, unalloyed talent when he saw it. More than that – Kyle knew he was looking at an important aspect of who Jan Ors was.

Jan watched the other dancers out of the corner of her eye, waited for the music that would bring them around, matched their jete, turned to a pirouette, and held an arabesque. It collapsed for the lack of pointed shoes and the practice necessary to sustain it, but applause thundered nonetheless, and flowers landed around her feet.

The whole thing looked so real, and sounded so real, that for one fleeting second Jan imagined it was real and took a bow. Then, as the sound died away, and the video started to fade, she lifted the visor. She was shocked to see him sitting there, to hear the sound of his clapping, and heard herself lash out. "You don't have anything better to do than make fun of me?"

Kyle looked hurt. "You have it wrong. You were

wonderful. Where did you learn to dance like that?"

Somewhat mollified, and secretly pleased, Jan retrieved her blue coverall and stepped into the lower half. "When I was a little girl. My mother was the choreographer for Alderaan's premier ballet company. And I was raised between rehearsals."

"And your father?"

Jan's head was tilted forward. She regarded him from under raised eyebrows. "Nosy, aren't you? My father was and as far as I know still is – a first class aerospace engineer. Hand me those boots."

Kyle looked around, saw a pair of well-scuffed boots, and bent to retrieve them. "Really? Does that mean you can repair drives as well as you dance?"

"Yes," Jan said matter-of-factly, "It does. How 'bout you, sparky? Got any talents other than the ones you demonstrated on that asteroid?"

Kyle frowned. "I went to the Academy to get an education. I'm more engineer than soldier."

"Yeah, and I'm a dancer," Jan said skeptically. "Come on. I'm thirsty."

The cafeteria catered to the less prosperous members of the passenger list and was half full. They waited through the line, made inconsequential small talk, and obtained their drinks. Kyle offered to pay and Jan allowed him to do so. It seemed natural to seek out the most distant and therefore private part of the room. They sat down, sipped their drinks, and regarded each other across the table.

"So," Jan offered noncommittally. "You wanted to talk."

Kyle shrugged. "Yeah . . . You probably won't believe me, but most of the troopers who died on that asteroid were good men."

Jan was silent for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was soft but determined. "A lot of good people died that day Kyle. Some were on my side – some were on yours. That's how war is. You chose to be a soldier. What did you expect?"

Kyle felt an unexpected surge of anger. "Yeah? Well, what

about my father? He was a craftsman, not a soldier, and the Rebs killed him anyway. Explain that."

Given his tone, and the partisan nature of the subject, Kyle half expected her to leave the table. To his surprise, and subsequent relief, she made no such move. In fact, her expression could better be described as one of surprise. "What planet?"

Kyle was taken aback. "A moon called Sulon. It orbits Sullust."

She nodded. "I'm aware of it. Your father's name?"

"Same as mine. Katarn. Morgan Katarn."

"And where did you get the idea that your father died at the hands of the Alliance?"

Kyle shrugged. "The Commandant sent me a message."

Jan shook her head in apparent amazement. "My mother says the Force moves in mysterious ways – and I never cease to be amazed at how right she is. Come on – I want you to meet someone."

Knowing that open contact with members of the Rebel Alliance could easily bring him to the attention of the Emperor's spies, Kyle made his way to Jan's cabin on his own. He touched the sensor pad. A tone sounded within and the hatch whirled open.

Whether due to luck, the connivance of a Rebel sympathizer, or a more generous budget than Kyle would have supposed, Jan's cabin was slightly larger than his. However, the fact that she shared the space with a chrome plated translator droid more than compensated for that particular advantage.

The machine came to life as Jan spoke its name. "A-Cee. I want to introduce someone."

The droid's head came up and servos whirled as he looked in Kyle's direction. What happened next took both humans by surprise. A-Cee stiffened, backed even further into the corner, and spoke in a hard unyielding voice "I am a bomb. Unauthorized access, manipulation, or interference with me or my programming, data storage modules, or other systems will result in the detonation of four point two



kilos of plitex nine explosive. I have identified a class three threat, and, in accordance with my programming, am taking appropriate action. Detonation sequence activated. Countdown initiated. Ten – nine – eight . . . “

Kyle took a step towards the hatch and looked at Jan. She ran the words together in her eagerness to get them out. “Override code alpha, bravo, zeta, one-niner-six. Execute.”

A-Cee paused, broke the countdown sequence, and seemed to relax. “Override authenticated. Detonation sequence terminated.”

Jan looked at Kyle and grinned weakly. “Sorry about that. It was the uniform, combined with the fact that he’s something of an orphan. The reason will become apparent in a moment. First, answer a question. When they sent your team to 456, did they say why?”

Kyle frowned. “No, not exactly. They said the objective was to take a communications relay station – no more than that.”

Jan nodded. “Well, the information they gave you was accurate so far as it went, but there’s more. The truth about the Emperor and his many atrocities is one of the most potent weapons the Alliance has. Once aware of it, neutral parties become more sympathetic, new alliances are formed, and support is solidified. The vast distances that separate the Empire’s planets make that difficult, however.”

Kyle started to object but Jan raised her hand. “Hear me out – see with your own eyes – then say what you will. The Alliance has reporters, brave men and women who roam from planet to planet, often within Imperial controlled space, collecting stories for dissemination to those willing to see, hear, and understand. Many of these correspondents have companions like A-Cee here, who are equipped to capture, store, and edit whatever they witness. Once the stories have been prepared, they are distributed throughout the Empire via communications relay stations like the one on Asteroid 456.”

Kyle, who was none too pleased by all the anti-Imperial propaganda inherent in what she’d said, crossed his arms.

"This is all very interesting. But why should I care?"

Jan was silent for a moment, and, for reasons he couldn't understand, looked sorry for him. "Kyle, there's no way in heck that I should show you this, but I'm going to do it anyway. Remember the reporters I mentioned? Well, A-Cee was assigned to a woman named Candice Ondi. S he was one of our best correspondents and died covering the story you're about to see. A-Cee – show Lieutenant Katarn the battle for the Sulon G-Tap."

Servos whined as A-Cee stepped to the computer terminal, withdrew a cable from the compartment located on the lower right side of his torso, and made a connection to the input panel. There was a moment of black followed by a holo of a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman. She introduced herself as Candice Ondi and said she was reporting from the site of an impending battle.

Kyle recognized the place immediately. There was no mistaking the canyon and the cavern. Thanks to the urging of his father and other influential members of the community, initial survey work had been under way before he left for the Academy.

Ondi described recent raids by stormtroopers disguised as Rebels, offered some none-too-convincing home video as evidence to support her allegations, and alluded to "confidential sources of information" that had warned of a major assault on the G-Tap.

Then, as the droid-mounted holocam panned across the cavern's interior, Kyle saw a sight that caused his heart to skip a beat. His father, Morgan Katarn, addressing a rag-tag group of teenagers and senior citizens. Kyle knew most of them by their first names. His father – a Rebel leader – the knowledge came as a shock. Ondi's commentary made the scene all the more moving.

"As you can see, when it comes to battling the Empire, both young and old agree. This group, under the command of a local militia leader, will defend a passageway the locals refer to as the 'back door.'"

Kyle, who had vivid memories of playing hide-and-seek

through the passageway in question, felt a lump form in his throat. He came to his feet. The story wasn't true, it couldn't be! But even the possibility made his palms sweat. The rest was worse.

Ondi and her faithful droid were there when Major Noda and his carefully disguised stormtroopers pushed their way up the river. Kyle, who had been more than a little cynical about the veracity of the report, experienced a sinking feeling as the first AT-ST appeared, only to be destroyed by a Rebel SLM.

Yes, he caught a glimpse of the Rebel designator painted on the machine's flanks, but knew how easily that could be faked. Especially since it was so difficult to envision a scenario in which Rebels had captured the machines and put them to such casual use. More than anything, though, it was the way the attackers moved up river that convinced him of the report's authenticity. Every action they took was right out of the Academy's manuals, and, as his father liked to say, "If it sounds like a bantha, walks like a bantha, and smells like a bantha, chances are it's a bantha."

Then, just as another AT appeared around the bend, and the rate of incoming fire increased, Ondi turned to the camera. She was about to say something, about to comment on the action, when a look of surprise came over her face. She'd been hit, and the footage as A-Cee ran to catch her was more eloquent than words. She tried to say something as she lay cradled in the droid's arms, frowned when the words refused to come, and lost all expression.

The holo faded to black and silence settled over the cabin. When Kyle spoke the words came as a croak. "I'm sorry about Ondi. Do you have any idea what happened to my father?"

He saw something unreadable in Jan's eyes. Pity? Compassion? Sorrow? He couldn't tell. Her voice was gentle. "A-Cee took some additional video – but I'm not sure that I should show it."

"Show me what you have," Kyle said grimly. "I want to know how my father died."

The droid looked at Jan inquiringly and she nodded her head. The screen came to life and Kyle found himself peeking out through a gap where a tarp had come loose and flapped in the breeze. Trees whipped by and beyond them Kyle saw the warehouses that lined the western perimeter of Sulon's spaceport and the northern outskirts of Baron's Hed. A checkpoint manned by men in glossy white armor appeared. There was a moment of darkness as A-Cee pulled back, followed by the sound of gears, and a brief glimpse of run-down buildings as the vehicle moved forward.

Then, safely through the checkpoint, A-Cee returned to work. The road paralleled the spaceport. Kyle saw a graffiti-defaced wall appear, noticed the strange-looking bumps that lined the top, and wondered why the birds liked them so much. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of flitting wings, bursting into flight at the slightest hint of danger, only to settle again.

Then, as the road moved up against the wall, and the truck started to slow, Kyle realized the bumps were human heads. He was still absorbing that, still struggling to deal with it, when the truck ground to a halt.

Kyle saw his father's face, felt his lunch rise, and forced it back down.

There was more, but Jan signaled A-Cee to stop and the droid obeyed. Jan, unsure of what to do or say, watched Kyle's face. She saw sadness appear there, quickly followed by anger, and hardening resolve.

He seemed to age before her eyes, and when he spoke, the words came as if from another man. "Thank you. The truth can hurt. But lies are worse."

Then, in a gesture that Jan would never forget, the officer ripped the bar that symbolized his Medal of Valor from the front of his uniform and threw it in the recycling bin. The Empire didn't know it, but a Rebel had been born.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

Jan entered the lock with a Mon Calamari pilot and a pair of maintenance droids. None felt the need to communicate, and they passed the time by watching the status board. The wait was relatively short, thanks to the fact that the hangar deck was pressurized.

A tone warbled its way from sub- to ultrasonic, an indicator light glowed green, and for those equipped to see it, an infrared blob appeared as well.

The hatch opened and everyone stepped out. In spite of the fact that Jan enjoyed the often awe-inspiring views available from the Star's many observation ports, the hangar deck was her favorite part of the ship.

Not the hangar bay itself, but the endlessly fascinating ships parked therein. Most were relatively small and belonged to passengers who preferred the liner's comfort to a long, monotonous trip aboard their own ships. That being the case, the Rebel agent saw all manner of vessels, including a work-worn lighter, a converted pinnace, numerous shuttles, and a barge equipped for long-distance cruising.

It was a joy to walk among them, to touch atmosphere-scorched metal, inhale the smell of ozone, and exchange greetings with sentient, who, like herself, enjoyed the kinesthetic feedback received while turning, pulling, bending, welding, connecting, bolting, and snapping parts into place.

Jan knew that her enjoyment of such things, like her

ability to dance, was a gift from her parents. And while others might see them as two separate talents, she knew they stemmed from the same. Impulse, a need to translate thoughts to motion. All of which had something to do with the fact that the agent had little to no interest in stationary machines.

Jan passed under a blunt-nosed bow, took note of a badly bent landing skid, and stopped in front of the aptly named *Truly Sorry*. Once classified as a speedster, the ship had outlived that description and was anything but fast. Beggars can't be choosers, however, not if they work for the credit-strapped Alliance, and the *Sorry* had been assigned to her. Until this mission was completed, that is. Then Jan would lobby for something better. Assuming the miserable pile of junk didn't kill her in the meantime.

Jan punched a string of numbers into the key pad located next to the belly hatch, winced as the badly worn actuator stuttered, and waited for the ramp to touch the lubricant-stained deck.

Her tools, the best money could buy, were stored in a high-quality self-propelled box located in the ship's tiny cargo compartment. She whistled, waited for the storage unit to trundle down the ramp, and thumbed the print lock. The lid whirred open, a tier of drawers popped free, and a power cable slithered toward an outlet.

The first and potentially most dangerous maintenance problem lay in the ship's hyperspace motivator, which had a tendency to produce false propulsion readings. That was a serious malady in light of the fact that the formula used to calculate hyperspace jumps required precise information regarding the ship's speed.

To access the motivator and run the necessary checks, Jan would have to free a belly plate, disconnect the wiring harness, and remove the lower half of the motivator housing. It was a long and not very stimulating job.

More than two hours passed before Jan backed the last bolt out of the motivator housing and heard it clatter on the deck. The agent realized her mistake the moment the casing

dropped into her hands. The *Sorry's* ancient metal-heavy housing weighed in excess of a hundred kilos.

She should have used a hydraulic floor jack or, failing that, summoned a maintenance droid. The unit sagged, she struggled to support it, and wondered what to do.

She could holler for help. But it was unlikely that anyone would hear over the chatter of power tools and the beep, beep, beep of passing auto carts. Or, and this seemed more likely, she could jump out of the way and allow the housing to hit the deck.

Chances were that everything would be fine. But what if the casing developed a hair-thin crack? Or took a dent she couldn't pound out? The odds of finding a replacement aboard the *Star* were not good. All because she hadn't asked for help, a tendency her mother had first noticed when she was four years old.

The voice startled her. "That looks heavy. Can I lend a hand?"

Unable to speak, and shaking from the strain, Jan nodded her head. At least half the weight seemed to disappear as Kyle Katarn added his strength to the effort and they lowered the casing to the floor.

"Should have used a floor jack, or called for a maintenance droid," he said maddeningly. "You could have hurt yourself."

Jan bit off the retort that threatened to launch itself from her lips. "Yeah – good thing you stopped by."

Kyle nodded absently. "Nice set of tools you have there. Must have cost a bundle. Need any help?" He looked hopeful and a little bit lost.

Jan wanted to say "No," wanted to chase Kyle away, but took pity on him instead. "Sure. Let's see if the Academy taught you anything useful. I'll work on the wiring harness – you tackle the diagnostics."

Kyle nodded. "Mind if I use your tools?"

"No, but thanks for asking."

The following hour passed in companionable silence. Though busy with her own tasks, Jan watched Kyle out of

the corner of her eye. She was impressed by his knowledge and the surety of his hands. He knew his way around a hyperdrive and treated her tools with respect. Finally, after wiping his hands on an oily rag, Kyle delivered his diagnosis. "The sensor package is shot – and the power breaker needs adjusting."

Jan had arrived at the same conclusion. "Good, especially in light of the fact that the sensor package is one of the few things we have a replacement for. Back in a minute."

Jan was halfway to the ramp when Kyle spoke. "Jan. . . "

"Yeah?"

"I want to join. I want to do the kind of work you do."

She looked at him, saw the commitment in his eyes, and nodded. "I don't have the authority to recruit agents, Kyle. But I know the people who do. We're scheduled to part company with the *Star* two days from now, assuming our repairs hold. You're welcome to come along."

Kyle nodded solemnly. "Count me in."

"Good," Jan said. "Help boost that motivator housing into place, and you fly first class."

Kyle laughed.

Neither noticed the tiny caterpillar like microdroid that crawled along the top surface of a support strut, or heard the high-frequency transmission it sent.

The cabin was almost dark and more than half filled with trophies, including an assassin droid's head, a con woman's four-barreled hold-out blaster, a spy's bionic arm, a bank robber's satchel, and much, much more.

Each trophy was precious to the cabin's sole occupant, and would occupy special niches in the home he would excavate one day. But that was then – and this was now. His name was Slyder, and he listened to the Rebels with the same attention a banker lavishes on her head accountant. Human languages and diction were tricky at times, and mistakes could be fatal. Not that any part of his profession was especially safe.

Like many Rodians, Slyder was a bounty hunter. And a very successful one. No thanks to his tracking skills, which



were mediocre at best, or his expertise with weapons, which was average, but because of the way he did his job.

Most of Slyder's peers, Rodians and other species alike, practiced their profession in the same time-honored manner. Wait for someone or something to post a reward, pursue the being in question, and kill or capture the quarry. This was a strategy that Slyder regarded as reactive, dangerous, and work-intensive.

His approach, which was unique to him so far as he knew, was to identify subjects that should have a price on their heads, identify the client willing to pay for his services, and then consummate the deal. By doing so he eliminated most, if not all, of the competition and maintained greater control over the enterprise. The *Star*, and the sentients she carried, made an ideal hunting ground, and saved the time and energy involved in running all over the Empire. Which explained why Slyder had lived in the same cabin for the past three years.

And which also explained his interest in Jan Ors, Kyle Katarn, Rosco Ross, and Ris Waller. The Empire, which maintained a long list of real and fancied enemies, was one of Slyder's best customers, and there was nothing they liked better, or paid more for, than Rebel agents.

Slyder grabbed a tube of pol pollen, popped the cork, and inhaled the substance through his snoutlike nose. The stimulant, which had consumed more and more of his income of late, boosted his ability to reason. Or so it seemed whenever he took it. There were three Rebel agents, each profitable in their own right, plus a droid, which might or might not have value, and a fledgling officer, who for reasons not apparent, was ready to desert. A profitable trip indeed.

Not only that, but an Imperial official happened to be on board, which not only created the perfect market for his goods, but bypassed the need to negotiate with petty officialdom. Slyder found the thought so good, so pleasing, that he rewarded himself with another dose of pollen.

The Donar suite was large and spacious. Stasis-fresh flowers, compliments of old man Haj, filled every available vase. A case of wine accompanied by a note from the Bonadan ambassador sat unopened in a corner. Crates of Caridian glassware, secured against an unexpected loss of gravity, sat against the inner bulkhead. Carefully selected pieces of Empire-style furniture sat in front of a large but mostly empty viewport.

All the members of the Donar family, each lost in their own world, were silent except for the occasional cough or rustle of fabric. The Governor had lost far too many credits to Lando Calrissian, and Madame Donar was angry. That being the case, he struggled to find a reason, any reason to avoid her. Especially given the fact that the ring she had given him on their twentieth wedding anniversary was gracing Lando Calrissian's hand rather than his. Had she noticed? And if she hadn't, should he attempt to win the keepsake back? No matter how hard he stared at the computer screen, it was blank.

The Governor looked up as the family protocol droid entered the room. He wore a black cutaway coat and made a noise similar to that of a man clearing his throat. Donar was thankful for the diversion.

"Yes? What is it?"

"A visitor, sir . . . His name is Slyder – he regrets the intrusion but insists on seeing you."

Madame Donar sat in a corner, pretending to work on her embroidery, while Nathan Donar, one leg hanging over the arm of his chair, looked up from a sports printout.

Governor Donar, aware of their interest, waved his approval. "Yes, yes, show the gentleman in."

The protocol droid bowed and backed away. Slyder, who wished the lights were dimmer, entered, searched for the Governor, and found him. He hated the fat human on sight – and wished there was a bounty on his head. "Greetings, Excellency. Stories of your wisdom, generosity, and strength are more numerous than the stars."

The Rodian's naturally foul body odor, overlaid by the

scent of his cologne, penetrated every corner of the room. Nathan smirked, his mother covered her nose, and Donar looked annoyed. He made no attempt to rise, nor did he invite the alien to sit.

"May I be of assistance, citizen Slyder? A matter of some urgency, I believe?"

Slyder touched hand to forehead in what Donar assumed was a gesture of respect. It conveyed just the opposite. "Your Excellency steals the words straight from my snout. I, like many members of my species, make a living as a bounty hunter. Not from a desire to accumulate credits, but out of our love for the Empire."

"Yes, of course," the Governor said impatiently. "So what are you selling?"

Slyder touched his forehead once again. "Your Excellency cuts to the very heart of the matter. There are at least three Rebel agents aboard this ship, plus a droid who may or may not carry valuable data. And an imperial officer who seems ready to desert."

The Governor came to his feet. His computer clattered to the floor. "An officer? Rebels? Who? Where?"

Slyder made his way to the entertainment center and held a holocube up to the light. "May I?"

Donar nodded and the cube went in. Light swirled and a series of three-dimensional images appeared.

Slyder allowed key scenes to play themselves out and made no attempt to narrate the action. There were snatches of clearly seditious conversation between the woman and her companions, a glimpse of the droid she kept hidden in her cabin, plus two conversations with Katarn. The exchange in the cafeteria seemed innocent enough, but the subsequent encounter was something else again.

Nathan didn't know what to believe. Was Kyle guilty of treasonous conduct? Or the victim of a pretty face? The halo disappeared and Nathan looked at his father.

The governor was livid. "Damn their miserable lies! Did you see that? Sending trollops to corrupt our officers! We'll arrest the lot of them and put an end to this outrage!"

Slyder dry-washed his hands, nodded sanctimoniously, and remembered the officer's Medal of Valor. It would look good in his trophy case.

Kyle stepped out of the fresher, wiped the remaining water from his skin, and started to dress. He had nearly finished when a tone sounded and a message icon appeared. Curious, Kyle touched a key and watched words flood the screen. The send box was blank, but the greeting was a dead giveaway.

"Hey, Rimmer – just a word to the wise – stay clear of the girl – and be ready to answer some questions. She's pretty – but not pretty enough to waste a career on."

There was no signature – just a blinking cursor.

Nathan's meaning was clear. Governor Donar, or someone close to him, knew about the Rebels.

Kyle felt his stomach muscles tighten as he punched the numbers and waited for Jan to answer. Her voice was sleepy, as if she had just awoken. "Hello?"

"Listen carefully. Someone, my guess is Governor Donar, knows about you and the others. They could arrive at any moment."

Jan was far too professional to waste time on questions. "Roger that. Grab what you can, and meet us on the hangar deck."

Kyle hit the off button, felt guilty about the manner in which he had betrayed Nathan's confidence, and remembered the picture of his father's decapitated head. His mouth made a hard, thin line as he strapped the imperial-issue side arm around his waist, threw his personal items in a carryall, and left the cabin. His uniforms, with the single exception of the one on his back, remained in the closet.

Jan peeked through the peephole, assured herself that the area in front of the entry was clear, and opened the hatch. A quick check confirmed that the hallway was empty. She turned to the droid. "There isn't much time, A-Cee. Let's get out of here."

The droid checked the light level to make sure his apertures were set correctly, switched to record, and followed Jan into the corridor. They hadn't traveled more than a few yards when a voice called, "Hey, you! Hold it right there!"

A blaster bolt served to underscore the words. Jan shouted "Run!," fired a shot in return, and followed her own advice. Not very speedy to begin with, A-Cee lost even more time as he paused to record Slyder, and the assortment of Imperial military personnel recruited to support him. The Captain, who was one of old man Haj's many granddaughters, had refused to take sides.

Ondi would have been proud of the way A-Cee ripped off a four-second scene and checked to make sure it was good prior to lurching away. He didn't get far, though. Slyder's energy bolt hit the center of his back, bored a hole through one of his subprocessors, and triggered an emergency shutdown. The droid collapsed as Jan looked back. She swore under her breath, ducked around a corner, and ran even faster.

Kyle burst out of the lock, ran across the deck, and spotted Rosco. He held a blaster carbine cradled in his arms and looked ready to use it.

"Has Jan arrived?"

"Not yet."

"How 'bout Waller?"

The Reb jerked his thumb up towards the cockpit. "Manning the turret."

"Okay - I'll crank her up - you cover Jan and A-Cee."

Rosco frowned. "Who died and made you Emperor?"

"Can you fly this thing?"

Rosco shook his head. "Nah, Jan's the pilot."

"Well, I can."

"Glad to hear it, Admiral, but how you gonna open those doors?"

Kyle looked at the massive pressure doors, wondered how he had missed such an obvious problem, and tried to sound confident. "You cover Jan. I'll handle the rest."

Kyle made his way up the ramp, turned towards the cockpit, and passed through the lounge. Waller dropped out of the overhead turret, saw Kyle's thumbs-up, and returned to his post.

Jan had allowed Kyle to initialize the ship's systems after the repairs were made and the access code was fresh in his mind. He entered the numbers, watched the control panel flicker to life, and grabbed a headset. "*Truly Sorry* to Hangar Control."

The woman was bored. "Control here – go."

"Request permission to depart hangar bay five minutes from now."

The controller's voice was stern. "Not funny, *Sorry*. Departure requests must be filed at least thirty standard hours prior to takeoff. Permission denied."

Kyle checked to ensure that Rosco was clear, fed power to the repulsors, and danced the ship out onto the taxiway. He hadn't flown a ship like the *Sorry* before, and she wobbled like a trooper on leave. The response came quickly.

"Control to *Sorry*! Return to your slot, power down, and lower your ramp."

Kyle tried to look in every direction at once as he spoke into the boom comm. "No can do, Control. Open the doors – or I'll open them for you."

"You don't pack enough punch," the woman countered grimly. "Return to your slot before someone gets hurt."

Kyle checked his weapon selector switches, discovered that he didn't pack enough punch, and chose a different approach instead. "Hey, Waller. See that shuttle on the far side of the bay? The one with the SoroSuub logo? Work it over."

Bolts of energy burped across the bay, hit the other ship's starboard wing, and sheared part of it off. A klaxon sounded. Warning lights flashed. The PA system came on.

"This is an emergency. Clear the hangar deck. I repeat, clear the deck. Standby for depressurization. This is--"

Sentients dropped their tools and ran, waddled, and, in at least one case, oozed towards the nearest lock. Kyle fought

to hold the ship stationary. "Where's Jan?"

Rosco spoke into the headset he wore. "No need to panic, Admiral – she's on the way!"

Kyle saw a lock open, saw Jan start his way, and wondered about A-Cee. The Rebel agent was about halfway to the ship by the time the lock opened again and a posse spilled onto the deck. There was a Rodian in the lead, followed by Nathan Donar, and a mixed bag of Imperial military personnel. They opened fire and Rosco returned it.

Jan picked up speed, Waller fired the turret gun, and four of her pursuers fell. The rest scattered. Kyle saw Nathan duck into one of the secondary locks and felt relieved. They hadn't been friends, not in the real sense anyway, but he wished the officer no harm.

Jan watched the *Truly Sorry* fade in and out of focus while it lurched up and down. Her breath came in painful gasps, her heart beat faster than it should, and lead filled her legs. She realized that the bleating noise meant something, that the air was getting thin, and she was about to die. Jan threw herself forward, stumbled, and fell. The steel felt cold beneath her cheek.

Kyle saw Jan fall, guessed the nature of the problem, and moved the ship in that direction. "Rosco? Can you help?"

Rosco, who had taken the precaution of slipping an emergency oxygen mask over his face, was already in motion. Kyle saw him, fought to slow the ship, and struggled to focus. The ramp was halfway open, which meant air was being sucked out of the *Sorry's* cabin. Kyle fumbled for a mask, found it, and pulled oxygen into his lungs.

Rosco bent, scooped the girl into his arms, and turned. A stray piece of paper whipped past his face as the doors parted and air rushed into space. He had a minute, maybe less, to reach the ship's interior. It was that or wait for the ensuing vacuum to turn him inside out. But what about the ship? Was it there? Or had the kid left them to die?

Rosco turned, found the *Sorry* looming over him, and saw the ramp touch the deck. The Rebel took five steps, felt the

ramp under his boots, and gave thanks as hydraulics lifted both of them into the ship. Not bad for a wet-behind-the-ears kid . . .

Kyle swung the speeder around, saw space suits heading for one of the ships, and wondered if he should fire on them. The *Sorry* shuddered as a concussion grenade exploded near her stern and he thought better of it.

The doors were halfway open by now. Kyle aimed for the overgrowing rectangle of blackness, applied more thrust, and ignored the controller's threats. Then, with surprising suddenness, they were free. Stars wheeled as he put the ship into a turn, and added thrust.

A voice came from next to his ear. "Thanks, Kyle. It looks like I owe you all over again."

Kyle grinned as Jan dropped into the copilot's position. She was pale but determined. "You're thinking of Rosco."

Jan nodded. "Him too. How's our tail?"

"Company's coming," Waller answered laconically. "One so far."

"Let's see what kind of legs they have," Jan said grimly, and pushed the sublight drive control to max.

Kyle saw a distant spark of light grow a tiny bit brighter, and felt the hull vibrate. He frowned. How much could the *Sorry* take?

"What about a hyperspace jump?" Kyle inquired. "We could lose them in a hurry"

"Yes, we could," Jan agreed, her fingers moving over the controls. "If the navcomp knew our coordinates. You didn't happen to load our position, did you?"

Kyle felt blood rush to his face. "The thought never crossed my mind."

Jan turned and her expression softened. "Don't worry. The navcomp will detect whatever beacons happen to be in the area, and if that fails, run star scans till it finds a match. That'll tell us where we are."

"Which is in deep trouble," Waller added calmly. "They're gaining."



Slyder, who owned a small but heavily armed vessel of his own, had allowed the humans to provide the transportation. A logical choice considering the fact that the Governor's yacht was larger, faster, and better armed than his vessel. At least it had seemed logical, before he came aboard, found himself relegated to the status of observer, and realized how incompetent the humans were. The vast majority of the posse were officers, most of whom were giving orders, none of whom were following them. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, there was the Governor himself, constantly throwing his weight around, setting the wrong priorities.

The droid was an excellent example. Rather than leave it aboard the *Star*, and deal with it later, the Governor had brought it along. And now, when his attention should be on the speedster, Donar had focused on the droid. The machine was spread-eagled on a table while a much-abused technician sweated over it. Cables ran from a patch panel to its CPU, power supply, and subprocessor wiring harness.

"I think I have it, sir just one more connection."

The Governor, robes rustling, moved in for a closer look. Nathan did likewise. Slyder, who saw the whole exercise as a colossal waste of time, hung back. The technician connected a cable, flipped a switch, and waited for some sort of reaction. A-Cee opened his eyes and tried to sit. Nothing happened. He remembered the chase, the programmed equivalent of pain, followed by darkness. He blinked as a trio of humans stared down at him. One of them wore a uniform.

A-Cee felt a subroutine kick in, heard the words, and knew his fate.

"I am a bomb. Unauthorized access, manipulation, or interference with me or my programming, data storage modules, or other systems will result in the detonation of four point two kilos of plitex nine explosive . . ."

There was a frantic, desperate attempt to deactivate the droid and stop the countdown. But Slyder knew there

wasn't enough time. All his plans, all the years of work, had turned to dust. The humans were worse than incompetent, they were irretrievably stupid, and deserved to die. Slyder drew his weapon, shot as many of them as he could, and waited for the inevitable. The trophies would go to his mother.

Kyle fought gravity as Jan put the *Sorry* into a tight turn. He was proud of the fact that his voice remained level. "What's the plan?"

"We can't outrun them," Jan said grimly, "so that leaves one choice."

"Blow our brains out?" Kyle asked lightly.

"Right idea – wrong people," Jan replied tartly.

The other vessel was closer now, so close that Kyle could see it with his naked eyes. Jan fired the *Sorry's* laser cannons, and he watched as coherent energy stuttered towards the chase ship. It was, Kyle thought, a courageous but mostly symbolic attack, since there was no conceivable way that the speedster's relatively light weapons would overcome the larger vessel's shields. Then the yacht exploded in a ball of flames. He threw an arm in front of his eyes. "What the-?"

The fireball died as Jan jinked to the right. The *Sorry* wove her way through a steadily expanding debris field as Kyle tried to absorb what he'd seen. "Lucky hit?"

The Rebel shook her head. "No way – nobody's that lucky. Some sort of internal explosion would be my guess."

Kyle pondered that. "What happened to A-Cee?"

Jan snapped her fingers. "Of course! They brought him around, shoved a uniform in front of his sensors, and blammo! Poor thing. I liked him."

Nathan had been wearing a class B uniform the last time Kyle saw him. Revenge, if that's what it was, brought none of the satisfaction that he had expected.

Their boots clacked against the deck as Jan and Kyle marched the length of the gleaming white corridor. Though the ship was crewed by all manner of beings, none of whom

displayed the spit-and-polish exactitude expected aboard Imperial vessels, there was no doubting their enthusiasm. Crew beings hurried toward duty stations, droids whirled this way and that, and a feeling of pent-up energy permeated the air.

The recently rechristened dreadnaught *New Hope* was more than six hundred meters long. She was old, slow, and in spite of efforts to upgrade her weapons systems, poorly armed. Kyle knew all that, but couldn't help being impressed by the ship's size, the spirit of her all volunteer crew, and the effort to make her operational again.

The dreadnaught had long been stationed over Churba as a sort of orbital war museum; the Alliance had used four deep-space tugs to break it free of the planet's gravity well and tow her away. Where they had gone, and how the refit had been carried out, were secrets. But the results were impressive. Especially from a psychological perspective, since the raid made the Alliance look strong and the Empire weak.

"So," Jan said as they rounded a corner, "what do you think?"

Kyle smiled. "You were right, Jan . . . she's impressive. Too bad a *Victory*-class Destroyer could fight her to a standstill."

It wasn't the wholehearted endorsement that Jan might have hoped for, so she let the subject slide. "I think you'll like Mon Mothma. Everybody does."

Kyle took note of the familiar way in which Jan used the Mothma's name, wondered if all the Rebels were so casual, and guessed that they were.

The twosome rounded a corner, walked the length of a short hallway, and stopped in front of two heavily armed guards. Jan motioned for Kyle to slide his ID card into a newly mounted scanner, waited for it to emerge, and pointed toward his blaster. Kyle felt self-conscious as one guard confiscated his side arm and the other patted him down. Apparently satisfied, the doors slid open, and Jan ushered him through.

"Have a nice meeting, Kyle. I'll see you later."

The ex-officer nodded, stepped through the portal, and heard the doors close behind him. The cabin, built to pre Imperial standards, was large but musty. Some of the furnishings were more than a hundred years old. The single occupant, a woman whom Kyle judged to be in her middle forties, turned to greet him. She had short auburn hair, greenish blue eyes, and wore a long white robe. Energy crackled around her, and Kyle could practically feel the power of her mind. She smiled and extended her hand. It was slim and cool.

"Greetings, Kyle. It's a pleasure to meet you. I was sorry to hear about your father. He was an important leader."

Kyle, surprised that she knew about his father, forgot his manner "You knew my father?"

Mon Mothma shook her head. "Not personally, but through a mutual friend, a Jedi named Rahn. He had a high level of respect for your father and sends his greetings."

Kyle was stunned. His father had known a Jedi? And earned the Jedi's respect? What else had been concealed from him?

Mon Mothma, unaware of Kyle's thoughts, gestured toward a conference table ringed with chairs. "Please, make yourself comfortable."

Kyle did as he was bid. Mon Mothma sat on one corner of the table. "Jan tells me that you want to serve as one of our agents. Why?"

Kyle, who hadn't expected any sort of challenge, was taken aback. That being the case, his words were more direct, more honest than they might otherwise have been. "I want to find the people who murdered my father and kill them."

Jan, who was watching the proceedings via an array of small, barely noticeable vid cams, lifted an eyebrow. Though understandable, a desire for revenge could cloud Kyle's judgment, and lead to mistakes. That being the case, she expected Mon Mothma to dismiss him on the spot and was surprised when she didn't.

"I understand how you feel, Kyle, believe me, we all do,

but we must struggle to remain objective. The people who killed your father were evil, but the greater evil lies behind them, and sits on a stolen throne. Once we defeat that, once we defeat Palpatine, the murderers will be found. So tell me, could you put your personal needs aside long enough to tackle a mission so important, it may change the course of the Rebellion?"

Kyle felt conflicting emotions. A healthy dose of skepticism, a leavening of fear, and pride at being asked. "Yes. I think so, anyway."

Mon Mothma weighed him with her eyes. "Good. May the Maker help me if I'm wrong, but I'm going to take a chance on you, and hope for the best. Watch the center of the table. I have a story to tell."

Mon Mothma regarded the slowly morphing holo with obvious distaste. "The Imperials call it the Death Star," the leader said grimly, "and it's an apt description given the fact that once the battle station is completed, it will be capable of destroying an entire planet."

Kyle frowned. "How?"

"It mounts the most powerful superlaser ever constructed."

Kyle tried to imagine it – a laser capable of drilling down through miles of rock, hitting the planetary core, and triggering an explosion so massive it would tear the world apart. What had Governor Donar said? "The Emperor has a thing or two in store for the so-called Alliance, and your father will be revenged"?

The statement made sense now – and sent a tingle down his spine. He gestured towards the holo. "Does it actually exist? Or are they planning to build it?"

Mon Mothma nodded. "Oh, it's real all right. The battle station is being constructed in orbit over the Despayre penal colony. Once completed it will measure a hundred and twenty kilometers in diameter, will have a complement of twenty-seven thousand and forty-eight officers, seven hundred seventy-six thousand, five hundred seventy-six troops, pilots, and other combat personnel, along with an

additional four hundred thousand support personnel and twenty-five thousand stormtroopers.

"Besides the necessary crew, the Death Star will carry assault shuttles, blast boats, strike cruisers, drop ships, land vehicles, and more than seven thousand TIE fighters. Its hull will be protected by ten thousand turbolaser batteries, two thousand five hundred laser cannons, and more than seven hundred tractor-beam projectors."

Kyle didn't know which amazed him more, the Death Star itself, or the detailed information regarding its capabilities. "No offense, but how could you possibly know these things?"

Mon Mothma looked him in the eye. "We know because beings sacrificed their lives to find out."

Kyle nodded soberly. "And the mission?"

"The research complex where the Death Star was designed is located on Danuta. We want you to go there, find your way into the facility, and retrieve those plans. Assuming the engineers identify a weak spot, the Death Star could be destroyed."

Kyle felt his heart sink. Fighting to avenge his father was one thing – throwing his life away was another. "What you describe is little more than a suicide mission. Why not launch a commando raid instead?"

Mon Mothma nodded and touched her remote. The Death Star exploded into a thousand points of light. A series of overlapping 3-D surveillance photos appeared. They grew successively more detailed as increasing degrees of magnification were introduced. An arrow appeared and moved from object to object.

"This is the city of Trid. The spaceport is here, the fusion plant, here, and, assuming our information is correct, the research facility is here . . . Within a thousand meters of these are homes, a school. I'd be interested in your opinion. Which is better? To send an agent? In hopes of a miracle? Or, assuming such a thing could be done, put a company of commandos on the ground, and accept the collateral damage? The Imperials would – why shouldn't we?"

Kyle felt blood rush to his face. Mon Mothma knew he'd been an Imperial officer, knew about the atrocities on Sullust, and was pushing his buttons. The knowledge made him angry. "Is this the way you get people to risk their lives? Through psychological manipulation?"

Mon Mothma nodded. "Sometimes . . . If I think it'll work."

Jan watched in open fascination as Kyle's and Mon Mothma's eyes locked and stayed that way for a long, long time. Kyle was first to look away. "Was that all? Did your agents provide anything else?"

"Just this," the rebel leader replied. "Some video of the room in which the plans are kept."

Another holo appeared over the table. This one was grainy as if shot with a low resolution lens from inches above the floor. The kind of footage a maintenance droid might capture if it had been enlisted as a spy.

Kyle watched equipment racks roll by enough uniform clad legs to go with five or six troopers, a large expanse of highly polished floor, and there, on the far side of the room, a vaguely T-shaped construct, suspended in a U-shaped frame.

"That's it," Mon Mothma said. "The memory matrix in which the plans are kept."

Kyle was about to reply when an officer crossed in front of the lens. There was something familiar about the image. He motioned to Mon Mothma. "Would you back up, please?"

The Rebel leader complied with Kyle's request, hit play, and allowed the video to jerk forward one frame at a time.

Kyle looked and looked again. There was no doubt about it, the officer was none other than Meek Odom, his ex-roommate and best friend. It appeared that Odom's request for a Special Operations assignment had been granted. And quickly, too.

Kyle felt tiny beads of sweat dot his forehead and resisted the temptation to wipe them away. "Thank you."

Mon Mothma's face was expressionless. "Do you know that officer?"

Kyle shrugged. "I thought I did – but I was wrong."

Mon Mothma nodded noncommittally and the holo disappeared. "So what's your decision? Will you take the mission?"

It was crazy, stupid, and possibly fatal, but Kyle nodded. Not for the Rebel cause, or in reaction to Mothma's blandishments, but for his father and those who died with him.

The interview ended shortly thereafter. Mon Mothma watched Kyle go, shook her head thoughtfully, and walked to the viewport. Jan entered through a concealed hatch. The leader spoke without turning. "So? What do you think?"

Jan shrugged. "He's scared – but who wouldn't be? The chances for survival are slim."

"And that bothers you?"

"Yes."

"Do the two of you have a relationship?"

"Not in the sense you mean. No."

"Could you kill him if you had to?"

Jan frowned. "Yes, if he deserved it. What are you suggesting?"

Mon Mothma turned. Their eyes met. "Katarn lied. The officer in the holo is named Meek Odom. He was Katarn's friend at the Academy, his only friend."

Jan struggled with conflicting emotions. "So? Maybe that means something and maybe it doesn't. Don't forget about the lives he spared on that asteroid, or his actions on the Star. Not to mention the fact that the Imperials killed his father."

Mon Mothma turned back to the viewport. "Yes, but what if the whole thing were planned? The head could be faked. What if his father is alive? Held prisoner against Kyle's actions? What if the whole thing is part of a complex plan to place a spy in our ranks? The Empire is capable of that and more. I want you to follow Katarn, watch his every move, and kill him if he flips. Can you do it?"

Jan nodded. "If I have to. But what then?"

Mon Mothma turned to take Jan's hands in hers. "The only thing better than a well-laid plan is a well-conceived backup



plan. Our forces on Toprawa may have a shot at the Death Star plans as well. The problem is that while the Toprawa plans include the battle station's hull design, and life support infrastructure, the Danuta plans include additional engineering schematics, and, if we're lucky, a complete map to the offensive and defensive weapons emplacements. We need both sets to ensure success."

"You could send someone else. Someone like me."

Mon Mothma shook her head. "Katarn was one of them – he knows how they think. Besides, a man stands a better chance of getting into what may be an all-male facility."

Jan released Mon Mothma's hands. Her words took on the sound of an accusation. "And Kyle is expendable."

Mon Mothma allowed her hands to fall. The resentment in Jan's eyes was plain to see. So was her duty to the Alliance.

"Yes, Jan. Kyle is expendable. We all are."

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## CHAPTER SIX

Kyle felt lonely and depressed as he made his way through a maze of corridors, passageways, and drop shafts to the hangar deck. In spite of the fact that he'd been granted the very thing he'd hoped for, a chance to join the Alliance, there was none of the "hail fellow well met" camaraderie he'd expected. Just an impossible mission, minimum support, and a none-too-emotional parting of the ways. Yes, Mon Mothma had shaken his hand, and Jan had sent an E-mail "Have a new mission sorry I can't see you off – best of luck."

Pleasant enough, but not the sort of send off lavished on departing heroes. Not in holovids, anyhow. It seemed he was and would forever be an outsider. Ah well, he was on his own, which beat the heck out of taking orders. That was something he was truly tired of.

A horn beeped, Kyle stepped out of the way, and allowed the auto cart to pass. The hangar bay was just ahead and he stepped into the main lock. A group of techs continued their noisy debate as they crowded in behind him. The discussion centered around the question of which one of the ship's meals was worst – breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Kyle cast a silent vote for breakfast, smiled when dinner won, and followed the men and women out into the bay where an avalanche of stimuli assailed his eyes, ears, and nose.

Where the *Star's* hangar deck had been only two-thirds full, this one was crammed with X-wing starfighters, assault shuttles, and a bewildering array of other craft. It was

almost impossible to hear himself think over the screech of power cutters, the rattle of chain hoists, the whine of hydrospanners, and the announcements made via the overamplified PA system.

Not only that, but where Kyle had encountered just the occasional whiff of ozone aboard the liner, he now inhaled a rich amalgam of exhaust fumes, fresh paint, hot metal, bonding agents, cleaning compounds, and lubricants. The total effect was overwhelming.

Kyle spotted a sign that read "Deck Master," along with an arrow which pointed the way. The first arrow led to a second arrow, and so forth, until he arrived at the edge of a yellow-and-black striped "no park" zone. A ten-meter exoskeleton occupied the center of the space. The operator was nearly invisible within his protective cage. He yelled amplified instructions to an overhead crane operator who raised a thumb by way of reply. Their failure to communicate via commlink seemed strange, but consistent with the overall atmosphere. The decal on the front of the exoskeleton's chest plate read "Deck Master."

Kyle stepped over a power cable, ducked under a wing, and entered the striped area. A Mon Calamari, a Wookiee, and a human were in line ahead of him. Fifteen minutes had passed by the time his turn came.

The DM towered above Kyle and his voice rolled like thunder. "Don't ask for a maintenance droid. They're busy right now."

Kyle shook his head. "No, sir. I'm here to select a ship."

The DM shook his head. "Can't hear you, hold on." Kyle watched with alarm as a pair of skeletal arms reached down, got a grip on his torso, and lifted him up. The DM had bushy eyebrows, bloodshot eyes, and at least three days' worth of beard. "There – that's better – say it again."

Kyle said it again. The DM raised an eyebrow. "Select a ship? What do you think this is? A supermarket? You got a chit?"

The data card was in his right-hand pants pocket. Kyle felt more than a little ridiculous as he searched for and found it.

Was everyone staring at him? Or was this sort of thing so common that no one paid attention?

The DM locked his mechanical arms in place and used the flesh-and-blood versions to accept the piece of plastic. The terminal mounted on his roll cage ate the rectangle and spit it out again. Characters flickered, steadied, and scrolled down the screen. The DM read them, shook his head in disgust, and grumbled about the “metal heads on the bridge.”

Kyle, who was used to an atmosphere in which superiors were never criticized, not even jokingly, must have looked concerned because the deck master chose to explain. “People in civilian clothes rarely return the ships they borrow, or if they do, we spend weeks patching the battle damage. I don’t know where you folks go, or what you do out there, but it’s hard on my inventory. Here – check these out, and whichever one you pick, take good care of it. The Alliance will deduct the damages from your salary.”

Kyle didn’t have a salary so far as he knew, but he smiled politely. The deck master laughed and put Kyle down.

Relieved to have both feet on the deck again, Kyle scanned the printout. He saw three hull numbers and the spaces they were parked in. Nineteen, twelve, and three. He left the no-park zone, found a slot number, and worked his way down a line of X-wings. Could it be? They were hot ships by all accounts, and he’d love to fly one. Assuming he could cut the mustard. Engineering students were trained to fly a wide variety of support craft but limited to thirty hours in TIE fighters. Kyle was perfectly willing to learn, however, and would like nothing better than a sleek one-seater of his own.

The numbers dwindled and Kyle’s hopes went with them. A halfjunked shuttle occupied twenty-two, followed by a grease spot in twenty-one, and a lifeboat in twenty. Kyle’s heart sank as he inspected the pre-Empire gig that occupied slot nineteen, the courier ship that slouched in twelve, and the Corellian-built lighter that overflowed three. The *Sorry* was nowhere in sight but would have been preferable.

Kyle gave a sigh of disappointment, returned to the gig, and started a lengthy inspection of each ship's hull, drives, armament, life-support systems, and controls. It was a laborious process but necessary, since his life would depend on the choice he made. In the end, with all the facts he could muster before him, the choice was rather simple.

In spite of the fact the ship in slot three looked as if had bounced around the inside of an asteroid belt for a month or so, she was only ten years old, and Corellian-built. A good beginning for any ship. He also liked the fact that her drives had been overhauled only three months before, her shield generators tested ninety-six percent effective, and her logbooks were up to date. Last, but not least, was the fact that he related to the name painted along both sides of her atmosphere-scarred bow the *Moldy Crow*. It sounded the way he felt – like a bird no longer accepted by its flock.

Kyle registered his choice, submitted reqs for eight hundred and seventy-eight pieces of equipment ranging from a reconditioned navcomp to toilet paper – and received five hundred and twenty-seven of diem. That left a three hundred and fifty-one item gap which he narrowed to two hundred and forty-five by “borrowing” one hundred and six tools, parts, and components from storerooms and surrounding ships, an activity that he thought went undetected but which was monitored by Jan Ors, and tolerated by the DM at her request.

And so it was that six days and seven hours after being inducted into the Alliance, Kyle Katarn set forth on what seemed like a highly improbable task. Two women watched him go. One focused on the importance of his mission The other on him. Like most of her kind, the courier ship had been built for speed, with scant attention paid to creature comforts. Jan made her way aboard, discovered that the pilot was little more than a teenager, and was amused by the pigtails she wore. The pilot accepted the agent's satchel, grumbled about women who carried too much makeup, and forced the bag into a tiny locker.

Jan considered telling her the truth, that the satchel contained energy cells for her weapons, a half dozen grenades, two knives, an ounce of plitex, a garrotte, a lock pick, electrobinoculars, a couple of comlinks, and a toothbrush, but decided to let the matter go.

The pilot turned. "You ready?"

Jan smiled. "Always."

The girl nodded. "Good. Now let's get a couple of things straight. I go by 'Jes,' not 'Jessica,' not 'dear,' and not 'honey.' This is my ship, I run it my way, and I don't need any advice from freeloading goof-offs. Got it?"

Jan kept a straight face. "Got it."

"Good. Strap in, keep your mouth shut, and hang on to your lunch. You'll be standing on Danuta before you know it."

Jan strapped into the copilot's position, thought about Kyle, and wondered how he was doing. If the pilot was even half as good as she claimed to be, and if the courier ship was even half as fast as it was supposed to be, she'd land a day before he did, and have plenty of time to reconnoiter. The hatch sealed itself, Jes brought the drives up, and the stars beckoned.

The run to Danuta took five days. The navcomp handled most of the piloting. When not asleep, or deeply involved in some maintenance procedure, Kyle rode an emotional roller coaster, but tried to marshal his mental forces.

There was a high as the mission began but that period was all too brief. The more he thought about the mission, the more problems he discovered, until they were like mynocks that sucked the courage from his bones.

The obvious solution was to devise a plan that dealt with the potential problems, and thereby defeat them, in his mind if nowhere else. He spent a lot of time constructing clever scenarios, his hopes rising as they took shape, only to encounter a barrier so large, so insurmountable, that everything collapsed. Finally, after many hours of frustrating work, he was forced to confront the fact that he

lacked sufficient information. The answers, assuming there were any, waited on Danuta. Air whispered through the *Moldy Crow*'s vents, the deck vibrated, and Kyle was alone.

Jan followed the Kubazian landlord up some twisting stairs, down a Filthy hall, and into apartment 4G. The "4" was missing, but the agent had memorized the landings and emergency exits. The entire building shook as a freighter lifted off. The landlord, who had been unable to let this particular set of rooms since the last tenant, a hearing impaired Rybet, had been murdered the year before, tried to minimize the negatives: "It gets noisy at times – but the view makes up for it."

Jan, who never turned her back on him, pulled a curtain aside. Thousands of dust motes sprang free, fell through filtered sunlight, and joined their predecessors on the floor. The window was a local product, and hadn't been washed in a long, long time. The agent thumbed the latch and pushed.

Additional light poured into the room and the landlord adjusted his goggles accordingly. Exposure to the red wavelengths gave him headaches.

Jan considered the view. The airport's security fence was only twenty meters away. Beyond that, out past a line of grounded ships, the freighter engaged its in-system drives, and blasted the length of the runway. It was fast and disappeared moments later. The terminal was a slow, one-story affair, and could have passed for a warehouse except for the antenna farm, and the surface-to-air missile battery that nestled against the west end of the building.

There was no sign of the *Moldy Crow*.

The stench of fuel, ozone, and sewage wafted in through the window. The Kubazian wanted to slap a scent disk over the end of his Link but thought better of it. Maybe, just maybe, the human was stupid enough to take the apartment in spite of the stench.

Jan turned toward the Kubazian, dropped some coins into his eternally ready hand, and said "Nice ambiance. I'll take

it." The bag, still loaded with ordnance, bounced as it hit the heavily stained bedspread. Rebel agents had a saying: "Home is where you lay your head."

Danuta more than filled the ship's view screen and Kyle was celebrating his first planetfall when the proximity alarms went off. The reason was quickly apparent. Two Imperial TIE fighters, one to either side of his ship, appeared from nowhere. A comm transmission followed. There were no preliminaries - just demands.

"Orbital patrol vessel X-Ray-two-niner-one to unidentified freighter. Report the commanding officer's name, number of passengers aboard, cargo if any, port of origin, and business on Danuta."

The words had a sing-song quality, as if the pilot had uttered them countless times, which he probably had. Kyle felt his heart pound in his chest, reminded himself that such checks were standard, and opened his mike. The story had been rehearsed numerous times, and, thanks to the experts on the Hope, Kyle had the forgeries to back it up.

"*Moldy Crow* to Imperial X-Ray-two-niner-one. Roger that . . . My name's Drexel, Dan Drexel, and I'm the sole person aboard. My port of origin was Drog VI in the Corporate Sector. I've got a load of high priority spares for the Brodsport Mining Corporation. Rel Farley's the assistant manager there . . . tell him the first beer's on me."

Farley was a Reb sympathizer, or so Kyle assumed, and was ready to confirm the agent's story. Silence ensued as the pilot checked with Brodsport, talked to his buddy on a different frequency, or picked his nose. Kyle had his credits on the last possibility when the clearance arrived.

"This is X-Ray-two-niner-one. You have clearance for Trid. Approach vectors are being uploaded to your navcomp. Stay inside them. It'll be safer that way. Have a nice day."

Kyle took note of the threat but felt a tremendous sense of relief anyway. "Roger that - *Crow* out."

The TIE fighters accelerated, curved away, and were lost to sight. Kyle allowed himself to relax a little, made contact



with Trid ground control, and descended through the atmosphere. It looked as if a huge brown blanket had been thrown over the planet's surface. It was smooth at first, rounded where hills pushed from below, and wrinkled where canyons came and went.

The badlands gradually gave way to farms where hardy colonists, men and women like his father, coaxed circles of green from the hard brown earth. Sunlight winked off metal roofs, vehicles added an occasional touch of color, and a two-lane road led towards Trid. The streets had been laid out grid-style by Brodspont engineers who saw the town for what it was – a miserable little outpost to which they were committed for no more than the duration of their contracts.

The result was a community in which what few niceties there were had been tacked on later. The spaceport was located at the eastern end of town, the direction from which Kyle was coming. It shimmered in the afternoon heat. Beyond the landing strip, and the low-lying city to which it belonged, Kyle saw a cluster of distinctly upscale buildings, and knew what they represented. The Imperial Research Facility on Danuta, the Death Star's intellectual birthplace, and, unless he was careful, the place where he would die.

He pushed the ship down, deployed the flaps, and fired retros. The *Crow* lost altitude, but way out there, on the very edge of the horizon, the agent saw an enormous black lake. It lay well within the Imperial Military Reservation, and it didn't take a geologist to see that the surface had been heated till it was liquid, and allowed to cool. Why would such a thing exist? Unless it was the result of an experiment of some kind. Kyle imagined a superlaser powerful enough to drill holes through the planetary crust and gave an involuntary shudder.

Then, with Trid ground control babbling in his ears and the navcomp beeping in sympathy, he killed forward motion, pulled the ship up, and lit the repulsors. Forces equalized and the ship hovered. Kyle checked the lay of the land, saw how the slots were configured, and danced the ship sideways.

The automated ground guide had been painted once, but that was a long time ago, and most of the covering had worn away, leaving islands of orange. Kyle followed the mottled machine to space twenty three where he plopped down between an auto-hopper that wore governmental markings and a Brodsport shuttle.

The other end of the spaceport, the part that was heavily festooned with “do not enter” signs, and guarded by a squad of stormtroopers, was home to six carefully maintained TIE fighters, still gleaming from the morning wash down. A good place to stay clear of.

Kyle ran the shutdown procedures, checked to make sure his indicators were green, and preset the emergency start-up sequence. When he left, if he left, there was a fairly good chance he’d be in a hurry.

The local customs agent used a hydrospanner to hammer on the belly hatch, Kyle slipped into his Dan Drexel persona, and hurried to lower the ramp. To bribe or not to bribe – that was the question. Not that there was much doubt.

The noise, combined with the way the building shook, brought Jan up out of an uncertain sleep. Her boots came off the sill, the front legs of her chair hit the floor, and she fought to focus her eyes. Though not especially busy by the standards of a planet like her native Alderaan, which had multiple ports a thousand times larger than Trid’s, the strip was reasonably active, and she had already monitored the comings and goings of at least fifty ships, not counting TIE fighters or atmospheric craft. So she was pleasantly surprised to see the *Moldy Crow*, and, after he had secured the ship, Kyle Katarn. The electrobinoculars wobbled over the tarmac, centered on the agent, and brought him closer.

He looked tall and fit as he talked to the local customs agent, shook hands, and checked the *Crow*’s landing skids. What did she like about him anyway? Besides the fact that he’d saved her life? Was it the determined look in his eyes? The strength in his hands? Or the laugh that came so seldom she found herself working for it? She wasn’t sure.

Kyle completed his inspection, sealed the belly hatch, and headed for the terminal. The action was sufficient to remind Jan of the mission she had accepted and the possibilities involved. What if Kyle was a spy? Sent to destroy all that she fought for? Her resolve hardened.

Jan checked to ensure that her weapons were loaded, set the satchels's self-defense mechanism, and let herself into the hall. The target had arrived. She had work to do.

Having already inspected the town from the air, Kyle wasn't especially surprised by Trid's lackadaisical seediness. As with most planets, the nightclubs, strip joints, and cheap eateries sat elbow to elbow with the terminal, and the outfitters, suppliers, and parts houses were just up the street.

The local architecture could best be described as Imperial prefab with a touch of rimworld colonial. Examples could be seen in the colorful planters that hung off second-story balconies, the wrought-iron bars that protected ground-floor windows, and the trash-filled water fountain that graced the town square.

The citizens were just as basic. They fell in six categories: contract employees, who sported caps with Brodsport logos on them; hardened colonists with work-thickened hands; scholarly types, whose clothes looked badly out of place; space trash like Dan Drexel, just waiting to leave; an assortment of aliens, none of whom seemed very happy; and stormtroopers who went every-where in pairs. Partly for the sake of security, and partly so they could watch each other.

The troopers gave Kyle the most cause for concern, since he was wanted by now. They might or might not have seen his face during the last shift briefing. Their presence, and the fact that he couldn't see their eyes, reminded Kyle of the extent to which the Emperor ruled through fear. He remembered what it felt like to be that powerful, and came to the sickening realization that he had enjoyed it.

Kyle waited for a tractor-wagon combination to growl

past, stepped off the curb, and crossed the square. Though careful to seem casual, Kyle had a destination in mind, and drifted in that direction. The possibility that he would look at the research facility and see a way in was more than a little remote, but he would give it a try.

As Kyle moved west, following the afternoon sun, his surroundings started to change. The buildings assumed a residential air and seemed more prosperous. Judging from the overall cleanliness, and the children who played in the street, this particular neighborhood had been set aside for research staff and their dependents. This was something Mon Mothma had neglected to mention, which might have been used in support of a commando raid.

A complex scheme that involved kidnapping a scientist and using his or her credentials to gain entry presented itself and was eliminated. Simplicity was the key, along with a healthy dose of luck.

Kyle felt something press against his back. It felt like – what? Someone watching him? But that was nonsense – wasn't it?

A seedy caf spilled out onto a patch of carefully swept sidewalk and presented a chance to rest, have something to drink, and check his back-trail. Kyle smiled at the hostess – she looked to be no more than twelve – and followed her to a plastic-covered table. She cleared the previous occupant's dishes away and promised to return. Kyle sat, turned toward the east, and scanned the street.

Jan rounded a corner, took two steps forward, and knew something was wrong. Kyle had disappeared, no, there he was, seated on the sidewalk. She pulled a wanted poster out of her pocket, pretended Kyle's face was a street map, and retraced her steps. The corner blocked his view but the question remained Had Kyle seen her? And if he had, did Kyle frowned. There had been something familiar about the distantly glimpsed figure, but he wasn't sure what. A person from town?

Probably, but he resolved to keep a sharp lookout just in

case. He touched his blaster for reassurance. It was new, but not too new, and secured in a cross-draw holster. Fast, but uncomfortable when you sat. Side arms, and even heavier weapons for that matter, were common on planets like Danuta.

Kyle finished his drink, left some coins on the sticky tabletop, and resumed his reconnaissance. The residential area was relatively small and quickly gave way to a carefully maintained security buffer, complete with pole-mounted surveillance cameras, recon droids, weapons emplacements, and a four-meter high razor-wire-topped chain-link fence. The buildings were low, sturdy affairs, at least half underground, and hardened against attack. He remembered Mon Mothma's holo and marveled at someone's bravery. Which raised an interesting question – what happened to that agent anyway? And why hadn't he or she been asked to retrieve the plans? The answer seemed obvious.

Kyle paralleled the security perimeter for a while, walking briskly as if for the exercise, and knew he wasn't dressed for it. The main gate was a massive affair, complete with a guard station, at least a dozen storm-troopers, an AT-ST, and a brace of armored ground cars. Not the sort of defenses he cared to test.

Careful lest he draw attention to himself, Kyle turned toward the east, chose what seemed like a quiet street, and followed it towards town. The reconnaissance had confirmed his worst fears. The Research Complex was essentially impregnable. The only way an unauthorized person could get in was if someone allowed them to enter.

The fact that Kyle knew someone stationed in the secured area had plagued him ever since he'd seen Meek Odom's face on Mon Mothma's holo. To force a choice between friendship and duty, to place Odom in terrible danger, went against everything Kyle believed in. After all, what could be lower than that? Yet what of the millions, the billions put at risk by the Death Star? What would they think of his moral dilemma? He knew the answer.

His feet seemed to be on automatic for the rest of the journey, as he made his way back through Trid. The *Moldy Crow's* security system indicated that there had been no less than three attempts to enter the ship while he was gone, none of them successful. Kyle scanned the video secured by the rivet-sized lens, dismissed the would-be burglars as common thieves, and reset the system.

Once sealed, the hull was more than adequate protection against the spaceport's noise and stench. In fact, if it hadn't been for the vibration generated by the ships that used the strip, he would have been unaware of their comings and goings. His dinner, purchased from a street vendor and carried back to the ship, was delicious. Especially after five days of dehydrated food. He wolfed it down, drank a quart of local spring water, and hit the rack. Sleep came fast – as did the dreams.

He had switched places with a Rebel back on the asteroid. The hatch made a natural point of defense. There were so many stormtroopers that it was impossible to miss. Bodies were piled on bodies until they blocked the corridor. That's when the fighting stopped, medic s removed their helmets, and Kyle started to scream. Every single corpse had Meek Odom's face.

Given the fact that Kyle had spent the night aboard the *Moldy Crow*, and she had spent it within the confines of her miserable apartment, Jan assumed that he had slept better than she had. That's why she felt resentful when he opted for an early start and forced her to do likewise. She double-timed around the west end of the runway just in time to see him emerge from an eatery. Her breakfast, which consisted of a cup of tea purchased on the run, left her hungry.

Still, it was interesting to see him on the move, especially after the somewhat inconclusive meanderings carried out the day before. What was he up to anyway? Assuming that an agent with no real training and no experience – had a plan.

Kyle stopped to get directions from a street vendor,

turned down a side street, and found what he thought was the correct address. He turned, saw nothing suspicious about the woman staring into a shop window, the man emptying slops, or the droid that whirred down the sidewalk. Then, having checked once more to make sure he was in the right place, the agent climbed a short flight of stairs and disappeared within.

There was a carving over the dilapidated door and Jan strained to see what it was. It looked like a wheel, with complicated spokes radiating out from the center. Jan had the sense that she'd seen it before, but she couldn't place it.

One good thing about the situation was the fact that it allowed her to buy a sweet roll in a nearby shop. She was licking frosting off her fingers when Kyle emerged. He scanned the general vicinity, failed to see her through the plate glass window, and headed for the business district. That left Jan in a dilemma. She could follow Kyle, and see where he went, or investigate the building and figure out why he'd gone there.

She chose the second alternative, waited till he was out of sight, and mounted the stairs. The door opened on well-oiled hinges, bells jingled, and the odor of incense filled her nostrils. The Ortolan monk had a long snout, floppy ears, and two disk-shaped eyes. His bright blue fur clashed with the saffron robe he wore. "May I be of assistance?" His voice was soft but audible over the distant chant.

A wheel of life, a monk, and the sound of chanting. Everything came together. A temple had been established in the building. There were thousands of religions within the Empire, and while Palpatine disapproved of many, most were tolerated so long as they remained apolitical.

Jan smiled. "No, thank you. I chose the wrong door."

The monk bowed. "There are many doors – and many paths beyond them. Go in peace."

Jan bowed, knew she wouldn't find much peace, not for a while anyway, and returned to the street. She looked back over her shoulder. What did a temple have to do with Kyle? Or the Imperial Death Star for that matter? She could have

asked, but what if the monk tipped Kyle off? He would recognize her description in a second. No, better to wait and see.

Jan took three steps and stopped. What if she'd been suckered? What if Kyle was a lot better trained than she thought he was, knew she was following him, and was determined to lose her? It seemed unlikely, but anything was possible. Especially for a double agent.

Jan broke into a run. It carried her down the street, around a corner, and onto the main drag. She stopped and looked both ways. Where had he gone? What was he doing? The answer, once she had it, was anticlimactic.

Kyle, apparently at ease, was strolling toward his ship. A lot of people had filtered into the Blue Moon during the last hour or so. Spacers mostly, with a leavening of colonists, and aliens with nowhere else to go.

A mirror ran the entire length of the room, its insect-specked surface barely visible between the bottles, jugs, gourds, decanters, and squeeze bulbs racked in front of it. The club's proprietor wore a dingy apron, and polished the same section of bar over and over again, as if doing so would bring him luck.

Up toward the front, where she could be seen through the window, a dancer bumped and ground her way through a two-hour shift, her face empty of all expression, her eyes far away.

Further back, seated around a too-small table, a group of farm boys, their empties ranked before them, ogled the dancer, and bragged of exploits they'd never had.

Kyle, who occupied one of about ten booths that lined the wall opposite the bar, split his attention between the dancer and the entryway. Not because the dancer was especially attractive, but because she was a legitimate place to look. The last thing he needed was a man with a "Who are you looking at?" drunk.

The afternoon and early evening had passed slowly, very slowly, and Kyle was nervous. So nervous he held the



blaster cradled in his lap. Once he had made the decision to place his friend at risk, the rest had been easy. Comm calls were almost sure to be monitored, as was E-mail, which left word of mouth. The fact that Odom was a spiritualist, almost certain to visit the local temple, offered a path for communications.

Now, having set events in motion, Kyle worried lest something go wrong. What if Odom hadn't gone to the temple today? Or didn't go this week? How many days could he wait? Or even worse, what if Odom had been to the temple and came through the door now backed by a half dozen stormtroopers? People change. Odom could have. The Blue Moon had a rear exit, he'd made sure of that, but it would be covered.

The better part of an hour passed, Kyle bought round after round of nonalcoholic drinks, and refused two offers of female companionship.

Finally, at the point where he was ready to give up, Odom arrived. He wore civilian attire and looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Kyle forced himself to wait, saw nothing suspicious, and released the grip on his blaster. Odom scanned the crowd and Kyle waved. Visibly relieved, the officer nodded, said something to the hostess, and made his way toward the back.

His face registered concern as he slid into the booth. "Kyle! It's you! I nearly didn't come. The security types lay traps sometimes."

Kyle nodded soberly. "You took a big chance. I'm sorry to put you at risk."

"What? And miss my chance to talk to the most infamous member of the class? No way!"

Kyle glanced around. If anyone was watching they hid it well. "Infamous? How infamous?"

"This infamous," Odom replied, pulling a piece of paper out of his pocket. "Here, take a look."

The paper was folded. Kyle opened the document, flattened it on the tabletop, and was shocked when his own

face looked back at him. The Empire had used the holo from the Academy's yearbook. The crimes he stood accused of included desertion, treason, and murder. He felt vulnerable and resisted the temptation to look over his shoulder. "I didn't kill anyone. Not intentionally, anyway."

Odom grinned. "And the rest?"

"Guilty as charged."

"Which brings us to the present."

"Yes."

"I know I'll regret this question. But where do I come in?"

Kyle explained.

Jan waited outside the Blue Moon, saw Odom enter, and felt sick inside. Mon Mothma was right. Kyle was about to meet with the officer he'd lied about knowing. Why? What were they up to? It was her job to find out.

Jan moved along the side of the building toward the back door. A drunk lurched out of the darkness and she shoved him out of the way. He backpedaled and fell into some poorly tended shrubbery. She ignored his pleas for assistance, turned the corner, stepped over a pool of vomit, and made her way up the back stairs. Hinges screeched as she pulled the door open and stepped inside. The rest rooms smelled of urine and the agent made a face. There was halfhearted applause as the dancer bent to collect her tips and a four-piece band started to play.

The agent spotted Odom, saw Kyle's back, and made for the adjoining booth. The hostess saw her, registered alarm, and rushed to intervene. At least two customers to a booth after 1600, the owner was strict about that, and so was she. A half-dozen bracelets jangled as she made her way across the floor.

Jan allowed herself to be intercepted, smiled innocently, and showed five fingers. "We're a party of six. The rest will be here shortly."

Relieved, and optimistic about the evening's take, the hostess returned to her station. Jan struggled to hear. It was difficult, especially after the band swung into a rendition of

“Rimmer’s Delight,” and the customers started to clap. She heard snatches though, including Kyle’s promise to keep Odom’s identity secret, and “the need to build a believable story.”

The meeting ended after about thirty minutes. Odom left via the front door, and Kyle headed for the back. Jan paid for her drink, loosened her blaster, and followed. Her heart was beating like a trip-hammer. She’d killed people, more than she cared to remember, but never like this. Never someone she knew, and never in cold blood.

The door closed behind Kyle and Jan pushed it open. Drives roared as a ship lowered itself onto the tarmac a quarter klick away. She looked around. The area appeared clear, and the ship would cover the noise she made. The possibility that Kyle might have body armor under his clothes suggested a head shot. Jan raised her weapon, adopted a two-handed stance, and took careful aim.

The old Kyle would have felt the pressure against the back of his head and dismissed it. This one drew his weapon in one smooth motion, turned, and started to squeeze the trigger. But he saw his would-be assassin’s face, and stopped. Jan saw his hesitation, knew she should have fired, and cursed her weakness.

Kyle, unable to trust his own eyes, held the weapon where it was, but closed the gap between them.

She’d been prepared to kill him, that much was clear, but why? The Empire, yes, but the Alliance was supposed to be above such things. Kyle knew he should shoot her, should burn a hole through her brain, but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

He remembered the first time he’d seen those eyes, calm even in the face of death, centered on something he couldn’t see. His arm sank and the blaster with it. Hers did likewise.

Jan spoke first. “You deserve to die, Katarn. But someone else will have to do it.”

The roar of repulsors stopped suddenly as the pilot shut them down. The relative silence made his words seem louder. Kyle shook his head. “You have it wrong, Jan.”

"What about Odom? You told Mon Mothma you didn't know him."

Kyle shrugged. "I wanted to protect him, to leave him out of it."

"And now?"

"I pulled him in. There's no other way."

Jan allowed her blaster to slip into its holster. A pair of drunks wobbled around the corner, stumbled, and laughed hilariously as they helped each other up the stairs. She searched his face. "Why? Why would he help our cause?"

Kyle looked away and back again. "I don't know for sure. Friendship, his religious beliefs, it's hard to say."

"But you believe he will?"

"I'm willing to bet my life on it."

There was momentary silence. Jan thought about what she'd been prepared to do and shivered. If she had killed him, would it have been an act of fanaticism or patriotism? How did one tell the difference?

The answer, if one existed, refused to come. She forced a smile. "Come on. Let's have dinner. Assuming we can find a restaurant dark enough to hide your face. And it's on me."

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

It took three hours for Kyle to make his way across the ravine, find a path through the maze of boulders, and arrive opposite the gate marked "S-2." It was three meters tall and constructed of solid durasteel. An energy cannon might burn a hole through it, but nothing less would touch it.

Odom had explained that the gates had letter designations E for East, W for West, N for North, and S for South. Each side of the rectangular perimeter had four or five such openings for the convenience of maintenance and security teams who would otherwise have been forced to rely on the main gate, which would be an inconvenience at least, and dangerous in case of attack.

Kyle checked his chrono, found that he had a full hour to wait, and ducked behind a rock. He was well within the range of the nearest surveillance cam and would be vulnerable until darkness cloaked his movements.

The window of opportunity, and it wouldn't last for long, would occur at precisely 2100 hours when the officer of the watch, Meek Odom in this case, would use remote testing equipment to open and close the door locks. It would be during this test, while the door was momentarily unlocked, that Kyle would slip through. That, combined with Odom's ability to momentarily override the collateral security systems, would allow Kyle to penetrate the outer perimeter. The rest would be up to him, and, assuming he made it to the extraction point, Jan Ors, who had agreed to pull him out.

Kyle remembered the night before, their mutual reluctance to kill each other, and smiled. His expression froze as stones rattled nearby.

What was it? An animal? Or something more ominous? The agent wanted to investigate but knew better than to do so. Whatever it was might sense his movements. And what? Attack? Report his presence? Either possibility would be disastrous.

Kyle held his breath and kept a grip on his blaster. There was silence, followed by a sound similar to the first one, only closer this time. Metal rasped on metal, then moved away.

Slowly, his blood pounding in his ears, Kyle started to breathe again. The machine, whatever its purpose, had left.

The sun sank over the western horizon, stars appeared in the sky, and Kyle felt very, very small. The entire mission was insane. Fear spread icy fingers through his veins. How would a more experienced agent handle a moment such as this one?

Kyle remembered the breathing exercises the Academy had taught him and put the knowledge to work. His vital signs slowed, brain activity flattened, and time stood still.

Kyle was surprised when his eyes popped open, his chrono read 2070 hours, and the moment was at hand. Widely spaced blue-green perimeter lights had come on at some point during the last half hour. They threw a ghostly glow across the rocks.

Marveling at how rested he was, Kyle turned toward the fence and did some stretches. Then, confident that his body would respond the way it was supposed to, the agent elbowed his way toward the fence.

He hadn't moved more than a meter or two when a security droid appeared in the distance. It floated a meter off the ground and was mounted with no less than three auto blasters and a pair of independently controlled spotlights. They chased each other back and forth, probing the shadows for intruders, verifying the integrity of the fence.

Kyle weighed his alternatives. The lock would open in a little more than seven minutes. The droid was traveling at maybe two or three clicks an hour. There was no way to evaluate the variables precisely, so he would have to guess.

Kyle gritted his teeth, resolved to stay low, and low-crawled upwards. Loose gravel rattled away from his boots, his senses seemed unusually acute, and the droid grew larger.

The agent sprinted across the unpaved maintenance road that fronted the fence and dived into the shadow opposite the door. A quick check showed he had three minutes to go. More than he would have liked, but a necessary trade-off.

The droid moved forward, sensors scanning, searching for anything outside the parameters of what its programming classified as "normal." Was the machine faster now? Or did it only seem that way?

Whatever the truth, Kyle knew the droid would spot him before the lock opened, assuming it ever did.

Desperate now, and unable to come up with a better alternative, Kyle felt around the ground, found a baseball-sized rock, and stood straight up. He threw as hard as he could, not at the droid, but over its CPU housing, hoping to trigger a motion detector, or failing that, to generate some noise.

The rock flew straight and true, landed in the scrub, and caused a miniature landslide. The droid turned, aimed its spotlights toward the noise, and brought two auto blasters to bear.

Kyle turned toward the door, looked at his chrono, and saw the final seconds tick away. Then, just as the readout changed from fifty-nine to double zeros the agent heard an unmistakable "click." Kyle's heart was in his mouth as he gripped the T-shaped handle, gave it one turn to the right, and pushed. The door swung miraculously open and Kyle slipped through. The droid's spots washed over the door only seconds after it closed.

Kyle allowed himself a two-second celebration, checked his surroundings against the mental map created from

Odom's descriptions, and started to jog. Half a klick separated the fence from the complex. A surface patrol would sweep through the area in fifteen minutes or so. That gave Kyle plenty of time to reach the entry point.

The air shaft was Odom's idea. Like similar ducts located throughout the complex, the vent was intended to collect fresh air and carry it to the sublevels below. Security was ensured by heat and motion detectors mounted inside the shafts. The only problem was that a persistent software glitch had triggered a long series of false alarms. Repair requests had been submitted, and would be acted upon, but that was a week or more away. During the interim, alarms from that particular source were routinely ignored, providing Kyle with the perfect opportunity.

The complex loomed ahead. Kyle scrambled up a bank, leaped an ornamental hedge, and arrived in front of a duracrete wall. The roof was low and readily accessible due to the fact that ninety percent of the building was underground. Kyle followed the vertical surface to a corner, found the horizontal slots intended to make the facility more interesting to look at, and climbed hand over hand.

The roof was broad and flat. There was a gravel-like substance that crunched under his boots, a cluster of antennas, a reinforced landing pad marked with four flashing lights, and yes, the top of an air duct. Moving quietly, or as quietly as the gravel would allow, Kyle crossed to the far side of the roof. The duct was protected by a pyramid-shaped all-weather cap. His multitool made quick work of the screws – one to each side of the vent. They gleamed as they hit the roof.

That out of the way, Kyle wrapped his arms around the sheet metal, bent his knees, and lifted. There was momentary resistance followed by sudden freedom as the cover popped loose.

Kyle set the structure on the roof and peered into the pitch-black duct. He patted his belt, found the glow rod, and pulled it free. The ladder was obvious. The agent turned, stuck the light between his teeth, and lowered himself into



the shaft. He found a rung with his feet, tested the metal with his weight, and started his descent.

The light wavered back and forth across bare metal as Kyle sank into the darkness. He was committed now – and it was literally do or die.

Jan had retrieved her satchel from the apartment and used most of the contents to build a tidy little bomb. She buried the device near the north side of the security fence. The explosion would take place at precisely 2145 and should be sufficient to draw at least some of the surface forces away from the main complex. Then, at 2200 hours she would pass over that exact spot in the *Moldy Crow*, hose the area down, and head for the pickup point. It was not an especially fancy plan. But it should be sufficient to the purpose.

Jan was about to enter the *Crow's* belly when movement caught her eye. Pole-mounted lights bathed the area directly in front of the terminal. The local customs agent was there, as were half a dozen stormtroopers. The official waved a piece of paper and yelled something unintelligible. The Imperials turned, looked in Jan's direction, and started her way.

Jan ran up the ramp, hit "retract," and made for the cockpit. The battle was about to begin.

Kyle saw a large white numeral 1 and knew he had gone far enough. The ladder continued downward through a man-sized hole. Kyle stepped onto the grating provided for that purpose. The access hatch, also marked with a big white 1, stood in front of him. There would be guards on this level, lots of them. Odom had emphasized that.

Kyle drew his blaster, took a deep breath, and touched the entry plate. The door slid open, a commando appeared, and Kyle fired. The Imperial staggered, fired a shot into the ceiling, and fell. It happened so quickly there was no time to be afraid.

Kyle holstered his hand weapon, grabbed the Imperial's

assault rifle, and started down the hall. The lights were relatively dim and the walls were bare. The agent knew that he had two main allies surprise and speed. The trick was to make maximum use of both. The left-hand wall led to a door, a rather important door, one he would return to. There were other things to do first, however. An operations room appeared to the right, an Imperial moved toward the hall, and Kyle fired.

Jan bit her lip as the drives came online, quickly followed by the ship's navigation, weapons, and life-support systems. The emergency start-up sequence was fast, but not as fast as she wanted it to be.

The stormtroopers' commander saw the ramp retract, heard the drives start to wind, and ordered his men to fire. They obeyed and the *Crow's* shields flashed as the energy bolts struck.

Repulsors flared as the fighter lifted off, and the commander gulped as the bow swung his way.

To the soldier's credit he was still there, still firing his nearly useless pistol, when the belly gun cut him in half. The commando looked surprised, tried to say something, and fell. A pair of officers turned in Kyle's direction, fumbled for their side arms, and crumpled as Kyle shot them. He mounted the platform, checked for ammo, and took what he could.

A quick glance confirmed the first door to his left, another door to his right, and a hall straight ahead. Which strategy should he pursue? Check the hall to eliminate whatever opposition might be hiding there? Or try the first door – followed by the second?

The decision was made for him when a commando appeared at the far end of the hallway and opened fire. Kyle fired in return, saw the Imperial fall, and felt blaster fire fan the side of his face. A second commando, this one backed by an officer, triggered a three-shot burst.

Kyle ducked, went to automatic, and saw the Imperials

fall. Concerned that there could be more where those came from, the agent moved up the corridor, grabbed some loose power paks, and followed the hall to the left. The communications center was clear. Kyle checked, assured himself the hall was empty, and returned the way he had come.

A quick turn to the right brought him to the durasteel door with illuminated panels. Odom claimed the red key was required in order to open it, but what if his friend was wrong? Kyle approached the door, touched the access panel, and waited for something to happen. Nothing did.

Kyle was disappointed, but there was nothing to do but retrace his steps, position himself in front of the second door, and prepare for the worst. Once through, he would dash to the other side of a courtyard, open a portal, jump on a turbolift, enter the security station, and grab the key. All under fire. Not a pleasant prospect. The agent touched the control panel and the door slid open.

Jan saw the last stormtrooper fall, turned to port, and headed for the TIE fighters. If she could incapacitate some or all of the pursuit ships, the odds against a successful extraction would fall from totally impossible to very unlikely, which she saw as one heck of an improvement.

The agent fed power to the *Crow's* repulsors which put another three meters between the hull and the tarmac. All the Imperial pilots were running for their ships by now. Easy pickings if not for the fact that one of the fighters had wobbled off the ground. The ship was pointed in the right direction. Jan could imagine the officer's frustration as he attempted to coax full power from still-cold engines and bring weapons systems online.

Jan forced herself to wait while the *Crow* stabilized, her targeting systems beeped readiness, and her cannon indicators glowed green. Both pilots fired at the same moment. The Imperial pilot's shot was too high. Jan's hit the TIE fighter head on, detonated a full load of fuel, and blew the enemy vessel apart. The entire spaceport was lit by the

resulting flames.

The remaining pursuit ships were rocked by flying shrapnel, bathed in fiery fuel, and torn by Jan's cannon fire. The extraction had begun.

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Two stormtroopers stood with their backs to the door. Kyle spent a fraction of a second considering whether it was ethical to shoot them from behind, then fired as one of them started to turn. He nailed the second guard as well, moved through the hatch, and felt the door close behind him.

It was dark in the courtyard. Sheer walls rose ahead of and behind him. Two sets of ghostly white armor appeared to his right. They fired and Kyle fired in return. His weapon was on automatic now, consuming energy at a prodigious rate, but equalizing the odds. The imperials fell and blaster fire slashed from above.

Kyle turned, spotted four troopers on the walkway above, and flinched as a bolt singed his shoulder. Logic dictated that this was it, the end of his life, since no one could shoot that straight or fast . . . Unless – the thought acted like a trigger. Time slowed and his senses grew more acute. The Force was like a river that carried all before it. Those who lived in harmony with its currents were strengthened – while those who stood in opposition were tossed like chips in a flood.

Kyle stood within an eddy, chose his target, and fired. Not a long burst, but a single, perfectly aimed shot. The bolt found its mark, as did the rest. Kyle felt pressure from the right, turned, and fired again. The stormtrooper threw his arms out as if crucified and landed on his back.

The agent exchanged his nearly empty assault weapon for one snatched from the ground and ran for one of two steel reinforced doors. It opened to his touch and his heart lurched as the Imperials swiveled in his direction. Was there no end to them?

Surprised, and apparently unaware of the battle that had been fought in the courtyard, the troopers fell while still trying to bring their weapons to bear. Kyle grabbed their

reserve power paks and scanned the room. There was only one way to go – the lift.

The agent checked his weapon, touched the control panel, and aimed at the lift door. When it opened he expected to see a full squad of stormtroopers armed with everything up to and including rocket launchers. The lift opened and the platform was empty.

Relieved, but still apprehensive about what he would encounter one level up, Kyle entered and turned his back to the wall. It was a short ride but Kyle was ready when it was over.

The officer, a thin man with a badly scarred face, died first, and was quickly followed by a trooper who asked for his name, and a commando armed with a doughnut. The key lay within inches of the officer's fingertips. It pulsed with internal light and felt warm in Kyle's pocket. The trip down was mercifully uneventful as was the quick dash across the dimly lit courtyard.

Lights marked the door as did the bodies sprawled in front of it. It opened smoothly and closed behind him.

A quick check of the control area on his left, and the hallway on his right, was sufficient to assure Kyle that his earlier adversaries remained undiscovered. Or were they? The impulse that caused him to look upward came at the same exact moment as the blaster bolt that blistered the paint beside him. Kyle classified himself as an idiot for not noticing the upper-level window the first time he had passed that way, nailed the sniper with a sustained blast, and heard an alarm start to bleat. So much for surprise – speed was the single remaining ally.

The agent dashed forward, approached the door that refused to open the first time he tried it, and inserted the key. The door opened, a commando raised his weapon, and Kyle struggled to respond.

The low-level processor counted off the final seconds, released current down a wire, and unwittingly destroyed itself. The resulting explosion didn't cause much damage, but did throw rocks into the air, and made an imposing

boom. The motion, combined with the sound, set off no less than five perimeter alarms. Searchlights swept the night, flares popped high in the air, and security droids quartered the ground.

The officer-of-the-day, or night as the case might be, a major named Horst, had just received word of an intruder and had been assured that the matter could and would be taken care of. What he didn't know was that the officer who had offered those assurances was now dead.

Thinking that the intruder was being handled, Horst decided to deal with the perimeter alarms himself.

The duty AT-ST and two armored vehicles were ordered to respond, along with two squads of commandos. A Rebel raid perhaps? Horst hoped so. He grinned like the wolf he thought he was.

Kyle knew he had been a hair too slow, a tiny bit overconfident, and waited to die. The commando, certain of his kill, squeezed the trigger, and squeezed it again. Nothing happened. Stumped, and curious as to the nature of the problem, the Imperial checked his safety. It was the last mistake he ever made.

Kyle stepped over the body and entered the lift. Blue-white light poured down from above, and a square illuminated the floor. As before, the turbolift carried Kyle upward more quickly than he really wanted to go, and opened onto a spacious lobby. An open window ran along the opposite wall. Knowing he'd have to turn his back to it in order to explore the rest of the area, Kyle approached it.

A single glance was enough to establish that the area beyond was the walkway from which four troopers had fired into the courtyard.

Two stormtroopers, just arrived, stood over their bodies. Kyle shot them, turned, and went to full auto as more Imperials appeared from the right.

Luck, inertia, and adrenaline were all with him as the troopers staggered and fell. The stink of ozone and burned flesh filled his nostrils as he sensed motion and fired again. The droid, caught in the middle of an errand, beeped

pitifully and scurried for safety.

Kyle, frightened by his own reflexes, resolved to be more careful. Troopers were one thing – civilian workers another. He hadn't seen any thus far, but he knew they existed. Nothing would atone for an innocent life lost.

Kyle took a moment to reload and pick up some power paks before activating the red wall switch. A glassless window overlooked the downstairs hall. Kyle looked down, saw a section of wall slide upward, and realized how vulnerable he'd been earlier. A single commando could have potted him from above.

Kyle considered the jump versus the lift, and settled on the jump. It wasn't too far, and it would save precious time. He slipped his arm through the assault weapon's sling, swung through the opening, and hung from his fingertips. It required a conscious act of will to let go.

Jan waited until what she judged to be the perfect moment, brought the *Crow* out of the ravine, and locked the ATST in her sights.

The *Crow's* heat signature bloomed against the cool night air, and the AT-ST pilot was quick and looking for trouble. He made a half step to the left, fired his side-mounted blaster cannons, and smiled as the bolts went home.

Jan grimaced as coherent energy punched through the lighter's shields and triggered a cacophony of alarms. She fired in return, urged the ship forward, and redoubled her efforts. Twin lines of blaster fire converged on the walker's command module and something exploded. Light frosted the area as debris soared and tumbled away. The walker's legs, left standing alone, fell on a scout car.

Major Horst, horrified by what he'd seen, and more than a little frightened, ordered a retreat. He was a little too late. Jan, her eyes narrowed with determination, renewed her fire. The command car made an excellent target.

Kyle ducked into the heretofore protected area, "felt" the trooper before he actually saw him, and aimed for the spot

where the imperial would appear. The soldier obliged, staggered as if drunk, and fell facedown on the floor.

Cautious now, and hyper-aware, Kyle approached a waist-high wall. He looked over and down, spotted two troopers on a gently curved staircase, and fired one shot at each. They fell and tumbled down.

Satisfied that the stairs were momentarily safe, Kyle placed his back to the core around which the stairs had been wound, and moved to the right. Speed was of the essence, he knew that. He took the stairs two at a time. He heard a shout, followed by a wild spray of blaster fire, as a trooper discovered his comrades and sought revenge.

Kyle crouched low so as to present the smallest possible target, eased his way forward, shot the Imperial in the legs, and raced on past.

The stairs ended in front of a metal door. Kyle touched the access panel, fired his weapon through the quickly growing gap, and saw two troopers backpedal and fall.

The agent felt nothing in particular as they died and realized how numbing the violence had become. Shoot, kill, shoot, kill, always wondering if it would be his turn to die. The helmets made it easier somehow, since with the exception of the officers and commandos, his enemies died faceless, more like targets than people.

Another flight of stairs presented itself followed by another door. Kyle hated the doors by now, stupid metal things behind which danger inevitably lurked, and through which he must pass. How many more would he have to endure? How many more could he possibly survive?

The door opened, Kyle moved through, and felt his pulse quicken. He saw banks of electronics, tables covered with light circuits, and acres of raised flooring. He was close now, extremely close, and the excitement started to build.

An officer turned, saw Kyle, and died. A commando spun, attempted to run, and took a bolt through the back. Two troopers, one tall, one short, came at the run. Kyle targeted the tall one first, put him down, and switched to number two. His aim was only a hair off, but that was sufficient. The



glossy white armor did what it was supposed to and bounced the bolt away. Kyle tripped, sprawled on the floor, and felt, rather than saw the energy beam sizzle through the spot where he'd been.

The next shot, more luck than skill, caught the trooper square in the midsection and knocked him over. Shaken by the close call, Kyle scrambled to his feet, and stumbled forward. The grid-style ceiling stretched away, monitors hung like overripe fruit, and that . . . What the heck was that? It looked like a globe. Only somehow transparent.

As Kyle drew closer he realized that the apparition was a three dimensional depiction of the very thing he'd come for – the Imperial Death Star – as it would look when finally completed. A sure sign that his objective was within reach.

The air grew thicker now, as if evil had substance. It seemed to push him back. Kyle reached for the Force, found where it pulsed, and reentered the flow. It carried him through the holo and into the hall beyond.

The troopers seemed in a hurry to throw themselves in front of his blaster bolts and crumpled to the floor. An officer appeared from behind a console, ran forward as if to intercept him. Kyle fired a carefully aimed shot. He caught little more than a glimpse of Odom's face as he fell, hoped the footage would look believable, and stepped over the half-conscious body.

Odom watched his friend's boots walk away, wondered if he'd done the right thing, and knew that even though he hadn't fired a shot, his hands were red with blood. Lives had been taken, and lives had been saved. How would the scales tip? Only time would tell. The thought brought comfort even as the pain from his wound pulled him into darkness.

Kyle circled the large U-shaped desk, found the switch where Odom had promised it would be, and flipped it on. He heard a motor whine, watched the wall start to rise, and saw what he had come for. The red-, green-, and gold-colored memory matrix had the look of an overstuffed T hanging suspended in U-shaped arms. The wall behind it

was gold in color and bore delta-shaped patterns. Kyle vaulted onto the intervening table, dashed forward, and jumped down as the lights began to pulsate. His boots thumped against the floor and momentum carried him forward.

His fingers tingled as he reached through the force field, secured a grip on the matrix, and pulled it free. The module felt warm against his chest. He had it! The matrix was his! If he could fight his way out, if Jan was waiting for him, and if they could escape.

Though larger than he might have wished, the matrix weighed next to nothing, and Kyle had little difficulty carrying it. The assault rifle was a problem, though. So he dropped it and pulled his blaster.

The door was obvious. Kyle hit the control panel, stood to one side, waited as a commando stepped forward, and shot him in the temple. Troopers opened fire and a console exploded. The agent dropped to the floor, stuck his arm around the doorjamb, and fired where he "felt" they ought to be. They were, and after checking around the corner, he entered the room.

The lift was cylindrical in shape, clearly marked. Kyle hit the switch, waited for the door to open, and was relieved when no one shot at him.

Motors whined as the lift carried him upward and he thumbed the commlink Jan had provided. "Can you read me, Jan?"

The commlink hissed and crackled. Interference? Or something else? What if Jan had been intercepted? Shot down short of the research complex, or worse yet, taken prisoner? What would they do to her?

Those questions and more tortured Kyle as the lift jerked to a halt.

There were almost sure to be troopers outside, so Kyle put a fresh power pak in his blaster before he opened the door. The trick was to reduce the opposition before he left the safety of the turbolift.

The doors opened to reveal an immense courtyard, a star-

studded sky, and more troopers than he cared to count. The *Crow* was nowhere to be seen. Kyle felt a bitter sense of disappointment, resolved to take as many of the Imperials with him as he could, and opened fire.

A trooper fell, quickly followed by another, and still another, but there were more. Kyle slapped a fresh power pak into the butt of his pistol and aimed the weapon at the memory matrix. Maybe there was a backup. And maybe there wasn't. The least he could do was fry the one in hand. He was about to fire when he heard a rumble. The commlink was in his pocket so the sound was muffled: "Kyle? Do you read me?"

Kyle felt a sudden and almost overwhelming sense of joy. It was Jan! And she was alive! "Loud and clear, Jan what kept you, anyway?"

Repulsors flared and stormtroopers scattered as the *Crow* drifted in over the roof. Jan triggered a burst in the general direction of some commandos and lowered the belly ramp.

"Nothing much – had a few errands to run, that's all. Did you get what we came for?"

Kyle dashed across the open courtyard, thundered up the ramp, and stuck his head into the cockpit.

"Yes, I did. Let's get out of here."

Jan nodded, pushed the ship off the roof, and nosed away. Windows shattered as the *Crow* broke the sound barrier. Thunder rolled across the land, and a spark streaked across the sky and vanished over the horizon.



Interlude

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*The Valley*

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

Morgan Katarn was afraid. Afraid that he had missed something important, afraid that the planet which hung just beyond the transparisteel view port would prove unsuitable, and afraid that in spite of his considerable efforts, the Imperials would find the three hundred and forty-seven men, women, and children under his care and transport them to slave labor camps from which few, if any, would return.

All because they had exercised that most basic of human liberties: the right of free speech. First in meetings held within the privacy of their own homes, then in loosely organized gatherings, and finally in Baron's Hed, Sulong's principal city. Because the demonstration was over before Imperial forces had time to react, the colonists escaped without arrest, much to the local Commandant's embarrassment.

However, thanks to the holos that had been taken and a traitor in their midst, it was only a matter of time before the "agitators" would be identified and punished.

Even though Morgan Katarn admired the philosophy of nonviolent resistance, which the demonstrators espoused, and believed the strategy would work in the long run, he feared the "long run" might last a thousand years, a period of time during which millions might suffer and die. That being the case, he had elected to stay home. Some of the demonstrators had labeled him a coward and pointed out that nonviolent resistance often required more courage than combat, but Morgan stuck to his convictions.

Armed resistance had weakened the Empire's grip and armed resistance would bring it down.

The Imperials could have responded to the demonstration in any number of ways, including show trials, transportation to slave labor camps, or out-and-out murder. But the demonstrators considered that unlikely, until three families were massacred in one night, their homes burned to the ground, and Imperial AT-AT tracks left for everyone to see.

Morgan Katarn had their attention by then and, with funding supplied by Rebel sympathizers, organized an escape plan. The effort that followed, which involved hiding the fugitives on a long-abandoned space station, hiring a blockade runner, slipping out of Sulon's system undetected, and making the long, uncomfortable flight to Ruusan, had been nothing less than a series of minor miracles.

However, the hard part was over now- or so Morgan hoped. He turned to Captain Jerg.

The merchant officer was a tall, somewhat gaunt man, who favored a Republic-era Captain's cap, a sweat-stained tank top, and once-white pants. His feet, for reasons Morgan had never understood, went eternally bare. "So," Morgan asked, "what's it like down there?"

Jerg gave a characteristic shrug. "There's some low-profile indigs, pockets of ruins, and a lot of good-for-nothing real estate. The planet has a class-one atmosphere though, enough gravity to keep your feet on the ground, and something more . . . Something so special you can't hardly find it anymore."

Morgan saw the gleam in the other man's eyes, knew it was a setup, and asked the question anyway.

Success, assuming such a thing was possible, would hinge on Jerg's cooperation. "Yes? What's that?"

Jerg grinned. His teeth were badly in need of cleaning. "There ain't no Imperials down there .... Get it?"

Morgan forced a chuckle, indicated that he "got it," and posed the obvious question. "So how did you find it? And what's to say the Imperials won't, too?"

Jerg shrugged. "It happened about ten years ago. There



was a Destroyer on our tails. We took a random hyperspace jump and wound up here. As for the rest, heck, you're old enough to know there ain't no certainties, no way to be absolutely sure of the crew or to guarantee that an Imperial probe droid won't drop in for a look-see. But it ain't happened yet . . . and that makes this the best shot you're likely to get."

The answer wasn't especially reassuring, but it was honest, and the fact that Jerg and his crew continued to store contraband on Ruusan was a testament to the blockade runner's faith. That, plus the fact that the space station's holds were both cold and crowded helped make the decision. Morgan nodded. "All right, then . . . take them down."

The Cyclops carried two shuttles- both of which were kept in excellent repair- a necessity since so many of Jerg's cargoes were transferred under less-than-ideal circumstances. And it was a good thing, since each shuttle would have to make nine trips before the fugitives and their gear arrived dirtside.

Morgan accompanied the first load of passengers. The colonists, for that's what they were about to become, were an uncharacteristically silent group, teeth chattering from days spent in the nearfreezing holds and bodies hidden beneath multiple layers of clothes. The children, a normally rambunctious lot, were withdrawn. Morgan could hardly blame them. Life on Sulon had been hard, but most of the protesters had been second- or even third-generation farmers, which meant the security of a house to live in, whatever possessions they had managed to accumulate, and enough to eat.

Now they faced starting over, and, even worse, on a planet they'd never heard of, with a minimum of supplies and the constant threat of discovery. It was enough to make the most determined optimist a little depressed. A line formed and jerked through the lock as a crew member checked the settlers against the list on his datapad.

Morgan spotted a woman struggling to corral three small

boys. Citizen Roskin, if he remembered correctly. The Rebel leader scooped the youngest of the brood into his arms and offered the boy's mother a grandfatherly smile. "Can I give you a hand? My son is grown. But I remember when he was this size."

The woman smiled gratefully, provided her name to the purser, and passed through the lock. Morgan nodded and followed. One vessel was down on the surface, so the hangar bay seemed half empty. The remaining shuttle crouched as if ready for action. The ramp gave slightly as they shuffled aboard. The interior smelled of paint and ozone. Twenty rows of bolt-down seats had been installed in the cargo compartment. A crew woman pointed them toward the rear, and they obeyed. Morgan found a seat for the boy, secured his harness, and did the same for himself. There was a wait, and the youngster started to fuss. Morgan removed the multi-tool from a belt pouch, popped the power pak into the palm of his hand, and offered the device for inspection.

Kyle had given it to him five years before, and the handle bore his initials. The toddler grabbed the tool and shoved one end into his mouth. Morgan remembered that Kyle had been equally fascinated by his father's tools and, more important, by what they could accomplish. By the time he was a teenager, the lad could disassemble, troubleshoot, and repair anything on the farm, including Wee Gee, the family's one-of-a-kind droid.

The pilot interrupted Morgan's thoughts with a perfunctory safety lecture, lifted the shuttle on its repulsors, and guided the vessel out through widely gaping doors. The cargo compartment had no view ports, so there was nothing to look at.

The boy removed the now-goopy object from his mouth, said something unintelligible, and allowed the tool to slip from his grasp. Morgan strained against his harness and managed to grab the device before it drifted away. His thoughts returned to Kyle.

There were only two things he regretted about his life- his

wife's premature death, and the fact that his lack of financial resources had forced Kyle into a choice between life as a subsistence farmer and the Imperial Military Academy on Carida, an institution well known for its engineering curriculum, its unbending discipline, and its ability to produce the kind of fanatics he sought to defeat. Morgan remembered the day they had parted, how Kyle had looked in his uniform and how difficult it had been to keep his voice steady. "I want you to remember, son, when you're at the Academy, how very proud I am of you."

Kyle nodded, said all the right things, and boarded the first in a series of ships that would carry him to Carida. Time passed, but the questions continued to nag: What would the Imperials make of his son? A man to be proud of? Or a monster capable of murdering people in their beds? And whose fault would that be? Kyle's? Or his?

The boy gurgled, smiled engagingly, and crossed his eyes. Morgan smiled in return. "I don't know about Kyle, but they won't get you."

"Fort Nowhere," as Jerg's crew liked to call it, was shaped like a six-pointed star. All-purpose blaster cannon had been mounted at each of the star's points, the ball turrets ensuring that any attacker, regardless of approach, would enter an effective crossfire.

The cannons, plus subsurface missile batteries and rammed-earth walls, made the fort impregnable by anything less than a full-scale Imperial raid. A more-than-sufficient deterrent to pirates and the rarely seen natives.

A series of interconnected caverns were used to warehouse Jerg's cargoes and the supplies required to maintain the 'Clops. The pilot produced the necessary codes, received clearance, and lowered the shuttle onto a sun-faded X.

The ramp touched duracrete, a light appeared, harnesses were released, and the passengers were allowed to disembark. Many appeared dazed as they left the ship, staggered under the weight of the noontday sun, and shucked layer after layer of clothes.

Morgan followed them off the ship, located those he had

identified as having leadership potential, and led them through a blastproof gate. The land looked tough, as if it had been half-cooked and then left out to dry under the sun.

Mountains were a barely seen presence to the west. A roadbed so old that only its vegetation-clad symmetry served to give it away angled to meet them. The settlers eyed the harsh landscape, squinted into the sun, and kept their thoughts to themselves as they climbed a hill. Fresh crawler tracks led the way.

The supplies were stacked as Morgan had requested, within eyesight of the fort but beyond the scope of its direct influence, a necessity if the newcomers were to establish their independence and protect their children from the seamier aspects of fortress life.

The site occupied a rise and looked out onto one of the planet's many reddish-orange wastelands. The location, plus the supplies, and the cool, clean water that gushed from the recently drilled well, were sufficient to raise the colonists' spirits. Jokes were told and discussions begun. Twenty minutes later, the newly landed colonists were hard at work revising Morgan's plans, arguing over how to divide the surrounding land, and jockeying for power within a government they hadn't formed yet. Morgan smiled.

Things were on the right track. Morgan stayed with the settlers for three local days, welcomed successive waves of colonists, ensured fair treatment of the newcomers by the "firsties," helped erect temporary shelters, and guided groups into the caverns where mirrors and fiber-optic cable would be used to pipe sunlight down from the surface. Morgan was a farmer himself, and when he explained how sunlight could be combined with fertilizer and drip-style irrigation to produce healthy crops, they believed him.

Finally, when it became apparent that some of the colonists had become too dependent on his leadership and others chafed under the restrictions it imposed, Morgan knew that it was time to leave them for a while.

He borrowed a skimmer. It was more than ten years old, dented from hard use, and nearly stripped of its yellow

paint. The name Old Codger had been hand lettered onto the floater's bow, and that seemed to tell the story. But appearances can be deceiving. Morgan conducted his own inspection and found that the skimmer, like all of Jerg's equipment, was in excellent repair.

The rear seats had been removed to make room for cargo, so Morgan had plenty of space to stash his borrowed camping gear, a crate full of parts, the tools required to install them, and four five-liter containers of water. This would be more than enough if he was careful.

The natives weren't supposed to be hostile, but Morgan took a blast rifle just to be safe, along with a comm set and survival gear.

Morgan knew that as in most desert environments, the best time to travel was at night. But he wanted to see the countryside. By traveling in the morning and evening, he hoped to avoid the worst of the heat and still see the sights.

He left so early in the morning that the stars were out, and the sentry shook his head in amazement. He figured that anyone who ventured into the badlands, and didn't have to, was out of his mind.

Morgan, who hadn't taken anything like a vacation in more than fifteen years, gloried in his freedom.

The speeder hummed, the stars wheeled, and the wind caressed his face. It was fresh and carried the scent of the low-growing bushes, from which aromatic oil could be extracted if the colonists cared to give it a try, that covered much of the land.

For lack of a better destination, Morgan chose to follow the old roadbed. It took considerable resources to build such a highway, so where would it lead? To a city? Full of ancient ruins? He hoped so.

Jerg's crew, none of whom looked forward to rotations on Ruusan, did what they were required to do but ventured no farther than was absolutely necessary. The initial survey, conducted years before, had revealed one low-profile sentient life form, and that was all they needed or wanted to know.

Morgan, who never tired of learning, reveled in the opportunity to explore and observe. The landscape assumed a soft, almost surreal quality as the early morning light painted it in shades of lavender and gold. The air, which was so completely different from the stale, recycled stuff available aboard ship, was fresh and cool.

The feeling of intoxication was so strong that he laughed out loud, opened the throttle, and cheered as the skimmer surged ahead. It was good to be alive!

Hours passed, the sun hung high in the sky, and Morgan looked for a place to stop. He was hungry and, more important, very, very warm. A semirigid awning had been included in his equipment, and it was time to deploy it.

Morgan scanned the terrain ahead, spotted an interesting rock formation, and angled off to meet it. The boulder, for that was what it appeared to be, looked like a half-buried loaf of bread. The sun was just past its zenith, which meant that "big loaf" threw some shade to the east. Morgan steered the speeder into the rock's protection and felt the temperature drop.

Work had always come before play in Morgan's life, and some habits are hard to break. He instructed the on-board computer to run a routine diagnostic check on the floater's power plant and tugged, snapped, and swore the awning into place. It was then, and only then, that he took time for lunch.

The cooler, which had its own power source, was extremely efficient. The beer was cold, the locally grown fruit juicy, and the sandwich filling.

Having eaten his fill and restowed his gear, Morgan decided to circle the rock. The landmark was so prominent and so close to the road that it was certain to have been noticed. Maybe, just maybe, he'd find something of interest.

Gravel crunched under his boots, an insect buzzed in his face, and beads of sweat dotted Morgan's forehead. A wave of hot, sultry air swept in from the plains, ruffled the low-growing bushes, and lost its will to live.

Fissures appeared in the rock. Some were large enough to

stick his hand into, though he didn't. Patches of lichen clung here and there, and an animal scurried into its burrow. Interesting but not what he had hoped for. No graffiti, no pictographs, and no tool marks.

Finally, having circumnavigated three-quarters of the rock and concluding that it had no secrets to conceal, Morgan found the very thing he'd been looking for- signs of life.

The first thing he noticed was that while the blue-green ground cover grew fairly evenly everywhere else, this patch of earth was bare. So bare, and covered with strange, striated tracks, that he concluded it was subject to ongoing use.

Of equal interest was the fact that twenty-five or thirty holes had been excavated in the area. All were shallow, and some contained scraps of semi-transparent tissue that produced an unpleasant odor and dwindled in size as insects carved the treasure into bug-sized servings and carried them away. What was the stuff, anyway? And, more important, what created it? And why?

At first, Morgan thought the holes were too symmetrical to be the work of animals, but that was before he remembered the nearly identical nests that Sulon's flatwings liked to construct and realized his assumption was wrong. He had no reason to believe that sentients were associated with the holes, but that was the way it felt. Such feelings Morgan had fought to suppress his entire adult life.

Morgan had always been aware of the Force. As a child, with no one to guide his actions, he had used his abilities to animate toys, to entertain his baby sister, to nudge people in the direction he wanted them to go and, finally, in an act that changed the rest of his life, to push a bully off balance. Not much, just a little, so his first blow would be more effective. And the stratagem had worked. How could Morgan know that the bully would stagger backward? Would trip over a root? Would fall ten meters to the rocks below? Would die as a result?

No one knew what had actually taken place that day, and no one ever would, except for Morgan.

And what he knew, or thought he knew, was that he was too weak, too flawed to be trusted with such an ability, a talent that never ceased to plague him, to convey information he didn't want to receive, to remind him of that terrible day.

Suddenly paranoid, Morgan looked up and scanned the horizon. The desert shimmered and, with the exception of a single wind rider, was empty of life. Or so it appeared. But the Force said otherwise.

Morgan returned to his skimmer, his steps not quite as deliberate as he would have liked them to be, and was pleased to see everything just as he'd left it. The decision to abandon the original plan and travel during the worst part of the day suddenly seemed natural.

The next few hours were as unpleasant as the first few had been pleasant. In following the roadbed, Morgan was forced to face the sun. The goggles helped but failed to eliminate the glare. The sun screen provided shade but couldn't counter the heat.

Still, time passed, and the kilometers unwound. Sunset found Morgan at the point where the desert gathered itself into dunes. The road had disappeared by then, lost below tons of drifting sand. Morgan steered the floater between a pair of wind-sculpted mounds, found a U-shaped harbor, and brought the vehicle to a stop.

The Rebel knew there might be, and probably were, better camping sites back in the foothills, but finding them in the dark would be difficult if not impossible, and he was tired.

It took the better part of an hour to secure the skimmer and find the equipment he needed. Dinner consisted of stew and an ice-cold beer. It was refreshing, but the temperature dropped while he was drinking it, and that caused him to shiver. He donned a jacket, emptied the can, and started some tea.

The sun disappeared behind a mountainous dune while Morgan washed his dishes and laid out the makings for breakfast. He found the utility lamps, connected them to the skimmer's distribution panel, and flipped a switch. The



darkness took a sudden jump backward.

The wind shifted and blew from the north. Morgan shivered, shoved his hands into his pockets, and felt something approach.

Under normal circumstances, he would have refused the Force. But this was different. He was alone, a long way from help, and extremely vulnerable. The talent and the information it provided were suddenly welcome.

The Rebel tried to appear casual as he strolled over to the Codger, killed the work lights, and grabbed the blast rifle. The metal felt cool and reassuring as the human fumbled for a glow rod and moved away. Intruders, if there were any, would approach the vehicle, and lie had no intention of being there when they arrived.

Sand shifted under Morgan's boots as he climbed the side of the dune. Perhaps he'd be able to see who or what the creature or creatures were from a higher vantage point.

Ruusan had three small moonlets, which Jerg's crew referred to as "the triplets." The first satellite popped over the eastern horizon as Morgan arrived on the dune's wind-sculpted summit. The breeze made his collar flap.

The moonlight cast a surreal glow over the desert, and Morgan used it to reconnoiter. Something, or an entire group of somethings, had entered the area. He couldn't see them, but he knew they were there.

Then, just as a second moon joined the first, he saw what he had come for. The natives were shaped like medicine balls. There were fifty or sixty of them, all told, rolling before the wind, headed his way.

The very idea was threatening. Morgan raised the blast rifle, sighted on the lead organism, and knew he couldn't fire, not without provocation. He lowered the weapon, felt for the electrobinoculars, and switched them on. Though larger, the creatures appeared as little more than green blobs when viewed on infrared.

The third moon appeared, adding even more light to the scene. Now Morgan realized the natives were possessed of specialized flaps of skin that acted as vanes. The natives

could navigate in whatever direction they chose by raising, lowering, or turning their flaps.

The indigs, for he had no other name for them, had a ghostly quality. They ran before the wind and tacked as a group. They sought out minor obstacles such as boulders, hit them in a manner that threw their bodies high into the air, and tried to float as far as they could.

Something about the manner in which they moved communicated such freedom that Morgan wished he could be among them, rolling through the night, bouncing with joy.

It was that behavior more than anything else that caused Morgan to smile and sling the blast rifle over his shoulder. He was halfway down the dune before the risks associated with such a course of action occurred to him.

The bouncers, for that name seemed more fitting, deployed wind vanes, wheeled to the right, and rolled toward the dune. By the time Morgan reached the bottom, the natives were a hundred meters away and starting to slow.

Morgan wasn't clear on the dynamics of the process but watched in mute fascination as tentacles appeared from within, curved back over globe-shaped bodies, and writhed when they touched the ground. Morgan theorized that the subtle manipulation of the tentacles, plus friction with the sand, allowed them to brake.

The ball-shaped beings coasted to a halt, stood on gathered tentacles, and opened their enormous, light-gathering eyes. It was then, as the Rebel looked into their immense pupils, that he realized the creatures were nocturnal. One of the natives "walked" forward on its tentacles, made a series of whistling noises, and waited for a response.

Morgan shrugged helplessly. "Sorry, folks, I don't understand."

A second globe approached, used one tentacle to smooth the sand and another to write with. Morgan was pleasantly surprised. The syntax was strange, the words archaic but

understandable nonetheless. He translated as they appeared. "Finally, you have come." Morgan scanned the text again.

The words seemed to suggest that the bouncers had been expecting him. But that was impossible. He held the glow rod in his left hand and used the multi-tool as a stylus. "You were expecting me?"

The native read the words, smoothed them away, and wrote his reply. "'And a Knight shall come, a battle will be fought, and the prisoners go free'. So saith the poem of ages."

Morgan frowned. It seemed the natives had mistaken him for a character mentioned in the poem of ages, whatever that might be. He chose his words with care.

"Forgive me . . . but you are mistaken. I am not now, nor have I ever been, a Jedi Knight."

This declaration seemed to stump the bouncer, but only momentarily. There was a great deal of whistling and warbling as he, she, or it consulted the other members of the tribe.

Then, with a great sense of dignity, the native wrote his reply. "An alien knight will arrive from the east. He will fly through the air, stay the night in the city of Olmondo, and request directions to the Valley. So it is written. Knights can manipulate the Force; you manipulate the Force, so you are a Knight."

Morgan felt a sense of wonder. Could the bouncers manipulate the Force? He doubted that was the case, but it seemed clear that at least some of them could feel it, which explained how they had managed to locate him. Morgan swept the words away. New ones replaced them. "It's true that I have the ability to detect fluctuations in the Force and that I flew across the desert, but the similarity ends there. Please allow me to point out that I didn't stay in the city of Olmondo. Nor have I asked for any directions."

The bouncer read the words, exchanged whistles with its companions, and wrote one word: "Wait."

Morgan watched in amazement as bouncers danced every

which way, formed a circle, and started to dig. Half of their tentacles ended in deltashaped appendages which acted as small but efficient shovels.

Sand flew, and a crater appeared.

Then, just as Morgan was about to ask what they were doing, the activity stopped. A bouncer nudged the human from behind; he stumbled and paused in front of the newly formed depression. His light wobbled over the ground, slipped into the crater, and settled on something completely unexpected -

The top of a stone obelisk. It was black, and alien script descended into the sand. The bouncer's leader, assuming that was what he was, wrote with one tentacle and pointed with another, not in the direction of the recently uncovered artifact, but straight downward. "Olmondo."

Morgan felt ice water trickle through his veins. Olmondo! A city was buried beneath his feet! Who knew how tall the obelisk was? Twenty? Twenty-five meters? How the bouncers knew where to dig was a complete mystery, as was the extent to which his actions were aligned with the poem. Was the whole thing coincidence or something more? What if the bully had lived? What if Morgan had learned to use his talent, had studied under a Master, had earned a Knighthood? Would fate have drawn him here, to complete a mission laid down hundreds of years before? There was no way to be certain.

The question sounded innocent enough but raised the very real possibility that the bouncer was making fun of him: "Are you ready for the directions?"

Morgan rose early, prepared a Spartan breakfast, and went looking for the natives. While the human's instincts had driven him to find safety among the dunes, the bouncers had preferred to spend the night out on the plains.

He rounded the same dune he had climbed the night before, fully expecting to see the bouncers nestled into the sand but was doomed to disappointment. Rather than the bouncers themselves, he found a series of shallow

depressions, each covered by what looked like a carefully shaped, plastic tent which was actually made of thin, semitransparent tissue, the same sort of stuff he'd seen next to the bread-loaf-shaped rock. Unlike most tents, each of these contained a strange, inverted cone.

A closer inspection showed that the early morning sun had already warmed the air inside the tents to the point where water droplets had started to form on the inner surface of the cones. Morgan could see that as the water globules grew larger, they would eventually slide down the super-slick surface into the tissue-lined reservoir at the bottom of the depression. Later, when the bouncers emerged from whatever hiding place they had retreated into, a supply of water would be ready and waiting for them.

The solar still in the skimmer's survival kit operated on the same principle. It was an interesting example of the manner in which environment can shape evolution. The human was careful to leave the depressions undisturbed.

Morgan scanned the entire area but was unable to find any trace of the black obelisk. The bouncers had reburied the monument rather than risk discovery. The human felt honored by the extent of their trust and wished he'd been able to spend more time with them.

As on the day before, the morning hours were quite enjoyable. The air was cool and crisp, and his spirits were high. The path, memorized from directions received the night before, carried Morgan into the foothills. The land appeared untouched at first, consisting as it did of rocky, scree-covered hillsides; hard, flat-topped mesas; and deep, flood-carved canyons.

But as time passed, and Morgan's eyes grew accustomed to his surroundings, he saw hints of the distant past. Or did he? Had nature carved out the seemingly uniform terraces that interrupted a distant hillside? Could that pile of boulders have been part of a building once? Was he tracing the course of a riverbed or an ancient thoroughfare? There was no way to be sure.

One thing was certain, however. As the sun rose, and Morgan made his way even deeper into what he had come to think of as "the badlands," the Force thickened and acquired substance.

With it came the weight of his own doubts, failures, and inadequacies. Did he believe in destiny? And was this particular destiny his?

The possibility that it might he filled Morgan with regret. What had the poem said? "And a Knight shall come, a battle will be fought, and the prisoners go free?" What battle? What prisoners? Was the poem little more than historical gibberish, or was it something important, something he should have prepared for? The human hoped for the first-but feared the second.

The hours passed, an ancient roadbed appeared, and he followed it upward. The air, which should have grown progressively thinner with increasing altitude, became thicker instead, so thick that the human found it difficult to breathe and wondered why the skimmer was unimpaired. He checked his indicators and checked them again. All were green. Then, as the road took a turn to the right and passed between piles of rubble, he felt something tickle the back of his mind.

The touch was feather light initially but evolved into a steady hum. The vibration increased until his flesh tingled and his teeth started to chatter.

Morgan wanted to turn back, wanted to run, and knew that was the way he was supposed to feel. Someone, or something, didn't like visitors and knew how to keep them away.

The worst part was the knowledge that while he had the natural, inborn talent necessary to handle the situation, it wasn't enough. He lacked the knowledge and experience necessary to make use of the talent.

That being the case, Morgan could do little more than observe and pass his observations on to someone else.

The road gave way to an open area guarded by towering rock formations that looked like sentinels. Curiosity plus a

sense of personal connection drew him on. The skimmer slowed and coasted to a stop.

Morgan saw an opening, its edges ragged with broken rock, and knew the mystery lay below. The human left the skimmer and started for the hole. The atmosphere thickened, turned to quicksand, and pulled at his legs. Voices, so distant that the words merged into a single moan, caused his head to throb.

The opening, created when the roof of a cavern had collapsed, was a half-kilometer across. A single shaft of light found the bottom, and shadows hid the rest.

The stairs were covered with debris but were still navigable. They curved to the right. The voices continued to moan, and some grew more distinct than others. They pushed, prodded, and pulled at his consciousness. These were the prisoners of the poem, the entities he'd been sent to rescue but lacked the resources to help.

Finally, having curved halfway around the vertical shaft, the stairs came to an end. Morgan stepped out onto the Valley floor, moved under an entrancelike arch, and was stunned by what he saw.

A shaft of sunlight slanted down to illuminate the Valley's floor and the hundreds upon hundreds of monuments that covered it. Some were little more than upright slabs, made from rock that had been part of the chamber's ceiling. Others were more elaborate, ranging from blocky tombs to beautifully sculpted statues, miniature temples, and spires covered with alien hieroglyphics.

The human knew without being told that this was a place of death, a prison full of unreleased spirits, and a repository of unthinkable power. Power so vast, so terrible, that it could extinguish a sun, plunge an entire solar system into darkness, and condemn billions to death. But only if it fell into the wrong hands.

He pulled the multi-tool from its pouch with the intention of scratching a warning into the archway but couldn't control it. The device fell from nerveless fingers and struck the ground-

The moaning grew to a crescendo. Morgan placed his hands over his ears, but the sound originated from within. He back-pedaled, his head splitting with pain, knowing he had failed. All he could do was hope that a real Jedi Knight would discover the place, fight the battle that must be fought, and release the prisoners from their bondage.

Tears flowed from Morgan's eyes and wet his beard as he climbed the stairs and made his way to the skimmer. No matter what, he told himself, no matter how many excuses offered themselves to his lips, he couldn't escape the fact that he had failed.

It took hours for the wails to fade, for the atmosphere to release him from its cloying grip, and for the Force to feel as it should.

During the days it took to reach the fort and the weeks that passed during the voyage home, Morgan never forgot the Valley or the spirits trapped there.

So strong were his feelings that the experience was still very much on his mind many months later when his activities on behalf of the Alliance brought Morgan into contact with a Jedi named Rahn.

It had been a long day, and they had finished dinner. Wee Gee removed dishes from the table as a fire crackled in the fireplace and shadows danced across the walls. When the conversation took a philosophical turn and the moment seemed right, Morgan took the plunge.

The words were halting at first, but Rahn was a good listener, and clearly interested . . . so interested that he leaned forward and placed his chin on his fists. Rahn had dark skin, high cheekbones, and extremely white teeth. His eyes sparkled with excitement. "Yes! Go on. The Master Yoda told me about such a place, and I searched for it. What did you find there?"

Morgan finished the story and watched, fascinated, as Rahn paced back and forth. Energy seemed to crackle around him. His robes swirled and were attacked by sparks from the fire. "This is important, very important. So



important that I must gather a team to investigate. We need experts to probe and understand this place. Then, with you as our guide, we will make the necessary journey."

Morgan remembered the cavern and shuddered at the thought. Still, if it meant freedom for the voices that continued to fill his head, then he would go. "Whatever you say. I'll provide the coordinates."

"No!"

The answer was so vehement that Morgan was taken aback. Rahn saw his confusion and held up a hand. "Sorry, my friend, but the knowledge is safer with you. Much safer. I must travel. And there are those who hope to find me. Hide what you know and leave instructions for someone you trust. Those who follow the dark side would like nothing better than to find this place and use it for evil."

Rahn left the following day, and the Knight who never was etched his secret into stone and left it for his son. Then, like countless farmers before him, he plowed and planted. Winter waited, and people must eat.

He was murdered a few months later.



## Book II

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*Rebel Agent*

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## CHAPTER NINE

The planet had been a beautiful place, possessed of long, sunny days, snow-topped mountains, rushing rivers, and broad, fertile valleys. Valleys that had been cleared, farmed, and owned by four generations of settlers.

But that was before the Rebellion, before the resources it had consumed, and before one of the SoroSuub Corporation's mineral reconnaissance droids settled into the middle of Farmer Zytho's Braal field, tested the soil, and literally hit pay dirt.

Little more than three local months had passed before the liners dropped into orbit, and the settlers were "paid" for their farms and shipped to a desert world on the edge of the Rim.

The liners had barely broken orbit when a pair of SoroSuub freighters appeared and sent shuttles down toward the surface. Ten thousand machines rumbled out of their durasteel bellies, established their positions via global positioning satellites, and growled toward pre-assigned sectors. Each could eat, process, and deliver fifty tons of ore a day. The Emperor would get his weapons- and the share owners would get their money. Nothing else mattered.

This explained why the roads had fallen into disrepair, many of the once-tidy farmhouses had started to sag, and previously green fields had been transformed into machine-carved pits.

None of this held any particular interest for the three Jedi or the troops who accompanied them.

Their attention was on the Jedi called Maw. He stood in the first skimmer's bow, nostrils flaring as he sampled the wind, looking like the figurehead on some barbaric ship. The occasional jab of a hand was sufficient to impart his wishes. The helmsman steered accordingly.

The skimmers were perfect for the task. The large, open platforms housed repulsorlift engines and made excellent time over the gently rolling hills. Though vulnerable to ground fire, they afforded clear views of the surrounding territory and, thanks to semirigid awnings, offered protection from the summer sun.

Maw grinned and allowed the wind to support a small portion of his weight. In spite of the fact that the Rebels were clever and skilled at covering their tracks, they couldn't hide what they felt. Their fear sent ripples through the dark side of the Force, ripples Maw would follow inward until that which caused them was located and killed.

Sariss and Yun watched with amusement. Though just as ruthless, they felt somewhat superior and viewed Maw with the same affection that hunters reserve for their trackers.

Sariss was an attractive woman of medium height. She wore her hair boyishly short and, like her mentor, Jerec, always dressed in black. Black, with just a touch of red on her lips, collar, and nails. Her interest in the acquisition and exercise of power made her one of Jerec's most trusted Lieutenants – yet threatened the Dark Jedi as well.

Yun, a Jedi so young he appeared to be barely beyond his teens, sat to her right. She was his mentor and the center of his moral universe. Not only the fact that he had been invited to come but that he was treated as an equal added to his inborn sense of superiority.

A comm unit crackled. An officer touched a button, saw the wellknown face, and said, "Yes, sir."

Sariss detected the stiffness in his voice and knew who the caller was. She accepted the hand-held unit and saw that she was correct. "Jerec. How nice of you to call."

"Have you captured them yet?" The lack of a greeting was intentional one of the many devices Jerec used to keep others off balance. The Jedi was tall, almost regal in the way he carried himself, and so emaciated that his nearly translucent skin appeared to have been sprayed onto the surface of his skull. A strip of black leather concealed the caves where his eyes had been, and tattoos curved away from his thin-upped mouth. The *Vengeance* was in orbit above, but her sensors touched the ground.

Sariss smiled thinly. He knew that she knew that he already knew the answer to the question. It, like many of the things that Jerec said, was intended to subjugate her. "No, my lord, but soon."

Jerec smiled. No one but Sariss referred to him as "lord." It was part of her never-ending attempt to manipulate him, and he enjoyed it. He commanded only the ship beneath his boots, but he needed more. Much more. His words were cold and said more than they were intended to.

"Good. I grow tired of waiting."

Rahn looked out over the skimmer's blaster-scorched stern. A three-day growth of beard covered his jaw. His once white robe was red with Rebel blood, and black where the blaster bolt had scorched his shoulder. He could feel those who followed- and knew what they were.

Rahn turned toward the bow. His companions included Duno Dree, a young and not-so-experienced pilot; Nij Por Ral, a portly professor of ancient linguistics; Cee Norley, a wire-thin weapons expert; and Rolanda Gron, a Klatooinian technologist. They looked for encouragement, and he offered a smile. The wind caught the Jedi's words and hurled them into his face.

"We have a chance . . . if we can buy some time, if we can reach the ship, if we can shake the TIE fighters. Here's my plan. . . ." The Rebels listened and were quick to agree.

Such was the confidence of those on board that the Imperial skimmers followed the road at a calm, almost

leisurely pace. The Rebels could run, but they couldn't hide. Not with Maw on the job. They approached an intersection. Crudely made markers identified the spot where thirty-six farmers had died in a vain attempt to defend their land. Sariss didn't even notice. Her thoughts were focused on herself and the task before her.

Maw saw none of the beauty around him. None of the still-unviolated fields, the sun-dappled trees, or the curve of a nearby river. He sensed only fear, which drew him like carrion to blood. Yun found Maw's talent distasteful, likening his fellow Jedi to a Nek battle dog, sniffing its prey. He preferred more elegant demonstrations of power, such as the way in which the slipstream sought to avoid all contact with his carefully combed hair, or the manner in which a commando struggled to satisfy a nonexistent itch. A rather interesting manipulation in which he had . . .

The missile struck as the second skimmer breasted the rise behind them. Yun missed the actual explosion but turned in time to see wreckage cartwheel through the air and plunge to the ground. The imperial force had been reduced by fifty percent. The ambush had Rahn written all over it. At least one of his companions had known how to control their fear. He, or she, had gone undetected.

Yun grabbed a rail as the skimmer turned toward the threat. Sariss was on her feet, eyes narrowed, fists clenched.

Norley was still watching the effects of her handiwork rain down, still holding the empty missile launcher on her shoulder when the first skimmer started to turn.

The weapons expert dropped the first tube, grabbed a second, and brought it to her shoulder. The skimmer steadied and held. The Rebel's finger sought the firing stud. Something caressed her neck. She shivered and resisted the temptation to check it out.

"Hold . . . hold . . . center on the target." That's what Tech Sergeant Hooly had said over and over again- and that's what she did. The caress felt soft, like the scarves her mother wore. Then it started to tighten, and tighten, and tighten some more.



Norley dropped the launcher, clawed at her throat, and gasped for air. It was too late. Her eyes had started to bulge, and her skin had taken on a bluish tinge by the time the blaster bolt drilled a hole through her chest.

Sariss saw the Rebel fall, snarled an order, and prepared for the turn. The bow came around and the skimmer accelerated. Time had been lost and gained. A Rebel had been sacrificed. Why? The answer was obvious. The fugitives had a ship. All they needed was enough time to reach it. Sariss snarled at the helmsman. And the seconds ticked away.

The ship, the same vessel that brought the team to Dorlo in the first place, was small but adequate to their needs. Precious seconds elapsed as the Rebels ripped the camouflage away, pounded up the ramp, and strapped themselves in.

Duno Dree had dirty-blond hair, freckles that dusted the top of his nose, and peach fuzz on both cheeks. He claimed to be twenty but was actually seventeen. He cut the preflight sequence by fifty percent, eyed indicators as he flipped switches, and wished he was half the pilot he claimed to be. He'd flown his father's in-system freighters for six years. Well, three, given that half his time was spent in school. It wasn't enough.

The trip had seemed like a lark at first, an adventure to tell his children about, not the life-and-death mission it had become. The team had landed on Dorlo in order to convince Nij Por Ral that he should join them. Something he had agreed to do, but with obvious reluctance.

It seemed that SoroSuub's mining droids had uncovered an ancient, three-milelong wall, and the company had hired the professor to decipher the writing that covered its surface. Not to preserve the remains of a once-great culture but to take advantage of whatever knowledge was at hand. Por Ral had decided to tolerate the endeavor rather than see the artifact destroyed. To leave now, and to do so without securing the company's permission, was to

sacrifice all that he had worked for.

Dree flipped the final switch, listened to repulsors scream, and pushed the planet away. He harbored no illusions about what would happen next. It was too late to tell the truth, too late to tell Norley how much he cared about her, and too late to take refuge in his father's business.

The ship came off the ground, spun on its axis, and nosed down the road. Norley was dead, and the Imperials would pay.

Maw spotted the vessel first, roared a challenge, and waved his lightsaber over his head. The ship fired its blaster cannons, carved matching trenches down both sides of the road, and disappeared.

The skimmer bucked as it entered the ship's slipstream, veered off course, and rammed a hand-built stone wall. Maw jumped prior to the impact, Sariss was thrown clear, and Yun bruised a thigh. With the single exception of the helmsman, whom Maw beheaded, casualties were light.

The TIE fighters were waiting at the point where the last vestiges of the planet's atmosphere disappeared and space began. Dree put the ship into a turn, pushed the power plants to max, and entered a carefully prepared trap.

Like all ships of her size, the *Vengeance* mounted multiple tractorbeam projectors. Though normally reserved for docking and maintenance related purposes, they could be used to immobilize any ship foolish enough to pass within range. The only problem was the fact that they consumed a great deal of power and required skilled operators. The *Vengeance* lacked neither.

Dree swore as his vessel lost forward momentum. He fought to dampen the runaway power plants, and wished he were home with his family. Sensors beeped, a shuttle approached, and he was powerless to stop it.

Boc, also known as Boc the Crude, was in an excellent mood. And why not? Life was good. He enjoyed tormenting other creatures and looked forward to the hours ahead.

A green light appeared as the assault shuttle made lock-to-lock contact with the Rebel ship. Boc released his harness, stood, and made his way forward. He wondered what the Commandos were thinking. The Imperials, ninety-nine percent of whom were human, had a strong xenophobic streak and were suspicious of aliens.

His species, the Twi'leks, had twin appendages that protruded from the back of their heads, which explained why bigots referred to them as "worm heads."

Still, the Commanders were his, not the other way around. His to use, abuse, conserve, or spend. He could do anything he wanted with their human bodies, and the thought brought him pleasure as did the opportunity to assert his superiority. "On your feet, scum. There's work to do."

The Jedi led from the front and would have been amazed to know that the Commandos respected, even liked him for it. Not that it mattered, since their opinions were of no value whatsoever.

An order went to the Rebels: "Throw down your weapons, open your lock, and surrender. You have sixty seconds to comply."

Sixty seconds passed, and nothing happened. Boc shrugged, motioned toward the hatch, and watched a specially trained team drill a hole through the barrier and shove a nozzle into the newly created opening. The sleep gas made a hissing sound as it entered the Rebel vessel.

Then, with their opponents unconscious, it was a simple matter to force the lock, strap the Rebels to stretchers, and remove them to the shuttle.

The Rebel vessel was left to drift, and the assault shuttle was on final clearance into the black Super Star Destroyer's hangar bay, when the XO authorized a live-fire exercise. Turbolaser Battery Five scored a direct hit. The crew cheered, and the ship ceased to exist.

Rahn opened his eyes and looked up from his position on the deck. Something, he wasn't sure what, looked back. It had two heads- wait a minute- two heads and two bodies.

One was two meters tall, and the other a good deal smaller, so small, that it hung off the larger creature's combat harness. Both carried lightsabers, and that suggested Jedi.

The smaller one spoke. "Get up."

Rahn's hand went to the place where his lightsaber would hang. Not the first weapon, the one that he had left for Katarn's son, but the second, which had been Yoda's.

The smaller creature, who was known as Pic, smiled. "Thanks for the lightsaber . . . Hurry up. Or we'll use it on you."

Rahn struggled to his feet. The sleep gas had aftereffects. His head hurt as did the blaster burn. A hatch opened. The giant had an oversized lightsaber. He used it as a pointer. A grunt took the place of words.

Rahn forced a smile. "A creature of few words. How refreshing."

Pic frowned. "Shut up."

Rahn nodded agreeably and stepped out into the corridor. A squad of Commandos stood behind his companions. They were a bedraggled lot, and Gron was bleeding from a recent cut. The Jedi started to say something but stopped when he was shoved from behind.

It was a long march down gleaming corridors, past the sick bay and weapons control center, and onto the bridge. A utility droid crossed in front of them, and crew people passed in the other direction.

None of them had the slightest bit of interest in who the prisoners were or what would happen to them. Rahn had never felt so lonely and isolated. More than that, he'd never encountered a concentration of evil like that which lay ahead.

It felt as though the Force had been turned inside out. The dark, inner core was a seductive place in which power could be had, but at the cost of one's spirit.

And there, like a shadow within a shadow, waited the one called Jerec. A man once, but less than that now, or so it seemed to Rahn. The Force churned as the Dark Jedi schemed, hated, wanted, and plotted.

But the good side of the Force was present as well, and Rahn drew on its power, wrapped himself in a cloak of white, and smiled as the darkness retreated before him. Duno Dree, Nij Por Ral, and Rolanda Gron followed behind, their features downcast, unaware that a battle had begun.

Jerec waited as he had chosen to wait, with his back to the command pit and his nonexistent eyes on the stars beyond. It was a trick, but an effective one. At least half the crew believed he could see, in spite of the fact that both of his eyes were clearly missing. The manipulation amused the Dark Jedi and fed his gigantic ego.

There was a considerable amount of shouting and stomping as a noncom led the prisoners onto the bridge and rattled off some military nonsense. Regardless of what his position seemed to imply, Jerec had never spent so much as a day in the military. He saw their rituals as boring.

The Jedi waited for the commotion to cease and waited some more. He wanted to turn, wanted to rip the knowledge from their brains, but refused to submit to such weakness. No, it required discipline to control his spirit, as well as those belonging to his subordinates, subordinates who had more power than they knew, or were likely to know, since jealousy, envy, and a nearly universal lust for power kept them apart. That's why he never showed any signs of weakness, never revealed what he really wanted, even when others thought they knew.

Finally, when the self-imposed penance had been paid, Jerec turned. Captain Sysco was waiting.

"The prisoners are ready for interrogation, sir."

Jerec nodded. He felt Rahn the way hands feel a fire, as a presence that can warm flesh or burn it beyond all recognition. Even here, even now, the man was dangerous. Fear trickled through Jerec's veins and made him angry. Others were supposed to react this way, especially when he arrived. But him? Never!

Rahn watched the other Jedi's approach. Sadness filled

his heart. Here was a spirit so malignant that it rivaled Emperor Palpatine's. If allowed to achieve its goals, it would plunge the civilized worlds into a darkness so complete that a thousand years would pass before the light managed to dawn. The Jedi's head continued to hurt, and his shoulder felt hot. He pushed both sensations aside and waited for the assault.

Six additional Jedi, including Yun, Sariss, Maw, Boc, Gore, and Pic, emerged from the shadows and added their power to the growing sense of menace. Duno Dree, Nij Por Ral, and Rolanda Gron stirred uneasily.

Jerec, careful to count his steps, stopped five meters short of his subjects and regarded them through long-dead eyes. "Rahn, we meet at last. And who might these sad specimens be? Servants, perhaps?"

"I speak for myself," the Klatootinian technologist growled. "My name is Rolanda Gron, and you will learn nothing from me."

Jerec seemed to consider the technologist's words. He nodded in agreement. "It shall be as you say. Kill him."

Rahn lurched toward Jerec, but hands held him fast. The odd pair known as "the twins" shambled forward. Gorc walked and Pic rode. The Klatootinian tried to back away as the pair approached, but guards held him in place. Gore activated his clubsized lightsaber and seemed ready to strike when Pic jumped for the technologist's chest. He landed, hissed, and drove a dagger into the scientist's throat.

The Klatootinian looked surprised, felt blood gush through his fingers, and toppled over backward. Pic rode the body down, retrieved his knife, and wiped it on his victim's clothes. His three-toed feet left tracks through the blood. He jumped onto one of Gores tree-trunk-sized legs and scrambled upward.

"So," Jerec said reasonably, "now that the stakes are clear, please answer my questions. I have reason to believe that you know about the Valley of the Jedi, that you may have been there. Where is it? Provide the coordinates for the

planet, or the location where the coordinates can be found, and die a merciful death. Deny my request, and the suffering will last a long time. The choice is yours."

Rahn had spent a great deal of his life in contemplation. He knew there were things worse than death. "No."

Jerec turned to Yun. "Show us your strength."

Head up, eyes bright, the youngest Jedi stepped forth. His lightsaber crackled into life. Nij Por Ral swayed and fell to his knees. "Please! I beg of you, spare us! Rahn has the information you seek, not I."

Yun, conscious that all eyes were on him, paused, ready to strike. His eyes locked with Rahn's. "So, what will it be old man? The coordinates, or death?"

Rahn, who knew he was executing Por Ral as surely as if he held the lightsaber in his own hand, closed his eyes. "Death."

The linguistics expert screamed as the bar of bright blue energy sank into his shoulder. He screamed again as the blade was withdrawn from his still-smoking flesh. Yun was embarrassed by his failure to make a clean kill. He lifted the weapon over his head and brought it down. This blow was successful.

Jerec spoke as the badly mangled body hit the deck. "Not very pretty. But death rarely is. What of the mercy that men such as yourself prattle about? I fail to see how your methods differ from mine. Give me the coordinates."

Rahn turned to Duno Dree. The young man stood, tears streaming down his cheeks, his body shaking with fear. Rahn knew the boy, knew who he could have been, and found his eyes. "Tell them, Duno, tell them for both of us."

Dree's eyes seemed to grow larger as he turned toward Jerec. The Dark Jedi couldn't see the boy's face, but he felt the young man's determination and heard his reply.

"No."

Boc the Crude accepted the role of executioner this time. Dree closed his eyes. He could hear the shuffling feet and smell the Jedi's breath. Hands blurred, the young man's neck snapped, and he collapsed.

Rahn stumbled forward as he was released. Maw was waiting. The blows came hard and fast, more than he could count, and more than he wanted to know. His knees thumped against steel, and blood splattered onto the highly polished deck. Boots appeared, turned in his direction, and paused. He stared into his own reflection and readied himself for the kick. It never arrived.

Jerec went to one knee and whispered into the other Jedi's ear. The words smelled of mint. "Give me what I ask, or I will take it."

Rahn felt the other man's power and feared that what he said was true. Perhaps Jerec could take whatever he wanted, regardless of Rahn's wishes. He preferred death and tried to provoke it. "Why wait? Strike me down!"

Jerec touched Rahn's shoulder as if to comfort him. "In time, old man when I'm done with you."

Rahn felt something soft wrap itself around his neck. He started to choke and willed himself to die.

His eyes sought Yun's, and the other Jedi looked away. Rahn welcomed death's embrace and was more than halfway there when oxygen flooded his lungs.

Jerec stood. A rare smile touched his lips. "Thanks, old man. It might please you to know that Morgan Katarn journeyed here before you, suffered as you have, and took the secret to his grave. However, thanks to the fact that you instructed him to leave a record, we know what to look for."

So saying, Jerec turned away. Rahn tapped the energy that flowed around him and sent it forth.

Yun felt his lightsaber fly out of his belt and saw it flash across the intervening space. Warnings were shouted, bodies moved, but the damage was done. Rahn caught the weapon, rose to his feet, and turned it on. The air sizzled as a bar of bright-blue energy appeared over Rahn's shoulder.

Boc came at him, awkward at first, then unexpectedly graceful. He executed a series of diversionary spins, stopped, and slashed at a head that was no longer there. Rahn ducked, made a sweep at his opponent's legs, and saw blood fly. Boc tried to advance, wondered what was wrong,



and fell. Yun pulled him clear. It was later, in the sick bay, that Boc learned a tendon had been severed.

Captain Sysco frowned, drew his sidearm, and was about to fire when Jerec touched his arm.

"Thank you, Captain, but no. The practice will do them good."

Sysco wondered if Boc would agree, nodded obediently, and holstered his weapon. "Practice. Yes, sir."

Sariss came next, offered a flurry of classical moves, and was blocked at every turn. Maw bellowed a warning, charged into the fray, and vanished in a welter of blood. Medics had arrived by this time and dragged his torso clear. His legs, one lying across the other, stayed behind. Gorc chose that moment to attack from the side. Rahn sensed his presence, turned, and knocked the lightsaber from the other Jedi's hands. Pic hissed and was about to leap the gap when Jerec intervened.

A blast of energy threw Rahn backward. He fell, skidded, and attempted to rise.

Energy crackled as a lightsaber came to life. There was something birdlike about Jerec's approach. He raised the weapon and brought it down. Rahn saw an explosion of light, an old friend's face, and relished his freedom.

Jerec looked around as if actually able to see, and killed the power to his lightsaber. The air stank of ozone and blood. "Clean up the mess, set a course for Sulon, and arrange something special for dinner. The Valley is ours." Jerec's heels made a clacking sound as he left the bridge. The rest of the Jedi, those still able to walk, followed him out.

Sysco said "Yes, sir," stepped over Maw's legs, and headed for his cabin. There was a bottle of Bonadan booze stashed in the bottom drawer of his desk. This seemed like a good time to break it open.

The bridge crew, their expressions neutral, watched him go. It was a scene they'd never forget.

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## CHAPTER TEN

The Rimmer's Rest was more than a bar. It was an institution, a place where members of every known race could find their favorite intoxicants among the establishment's collection of 1,241 bottles, decanters, tubes, vials, jars, inhalers, and bulbs. And then, with the appropriate stimulant or depressant in hand, claw, or tentacle, members could retire to one of more than a hundred booths, some of which had been engineered to accommodate specific species.

Once ensconced, the average customer would be able to find at least a few samples of his, her, or its native cuisine. That, combined with the establishment's rather lenient policies toward weapons and their use, made the Rest an ideal place to conduct business. Any kind of business, ranging from the mundane to the out-and-out illegal, all of which explained why the droid known as 8t88 paused, eyed the alien hieroglyphic over the door, and entered.

Servos whined as the droid paused to get his bearings. He attracted some attention because of both his somewhat antiquated appearance and the fact that he had arrived alone. Where was his owner?

The question was to be expected. But it assumed that all machines were necessarily subordinate to beings having "natural intelligence." An absurd but commonly held notion that 88 resented with every circuit in his body. Originally designed for book-keeping and other administrative tasks, the first 88 eventually became outmoded and was junked.

Somehow, and the present-day 88 wasn't quite sure what had taken place, his original head and processor had disappeared and had been replaced by a unit that appeared too small for his two-meter frame. Or was it the other way around? There was no way to be sure.

8t88 had only vague memories of his previous existence. Nonetheless, he hated the cavalier manner in which his parts had been reconfigured. With that in processor, 88 was accumulating wealth, a large of amount of wealth, which would be used to find and punish the person or persons responsible for his disfigurement. It was not the sort of thing the average droid worried about, but 88 was anything but average.

No one took issue with the droid's presence, which was hardly surprising in an establishment where the saying "mind your own business" was not a platitude but a strategy for staying alive.

8t88 turned and walked down an aisle. White lights blinked along the margins. The bar was kept dark to hide the layers of grime and to protect customers' privacy. Red, blue, and green rings rippled the length of the evenly spaced columns and were reflected in the ceiling tiles.

8t88 switched to infrared and watched while bodies, weapons, and plates of recently delivered food were transformed into bright green blobs. The man he was looking for, a bounty hunter known as Boba Fett, would be somewhere toward the back, watching those around him, playing out one more day in the never-ending game of eat or be eaten.

8t88 waited for a brightly attired Rybet to pass, and walked down an aisle. The droid's hip made a squeaking sound and drew attention. A multiplicity of eyes checked him against mental lists, scanned him for weapons, and calculated his current market value. Once satisfied, they returned to their own affairs.

Most of the beings around 88 were biologicals or, if possessed of machine parts, mostly biological. 8t88 pitied them. The process of dying had begun the day they'd been born, hatched, or decanted. Yes, science might delay their

demise, but entropy would have its inevitable way. Except with machines, which could have themselves rebuilt and thereby live forever. The thought pleased 88 and resulted in what others perceived as a grimace.

The bounty hunter sat in a corner booth, his back to the wall, his jetpack on the seat beside him. A human might have resented the Tshaped visor and the fact that it obscured the bounty hunter's face, but 88 felt no such discomfort. He'd heard humans refer to eyes as "windows to the spirit" but had no idea what they were talking about. His voice was flat and synthesized. "Boba Fett?"

The human nodded. "And you are?"

"A potential client. They call me 8t88."

Fett gestured toward the opposite side of the booth. "Take a load off. Are you representing yourself or someone else?"

"Does it matter?"

The bounty hunter shrugged. "Nope. Just curious. Never worked for a machine before."

With no flesh to soften it, 88's grin took on a threatening quality. "Then get used to it. Machines are the future."

"Maybe," Fett replied calmly, "and maybe not."

"A man named Kyle Katarn will enter this bar in an hour or so. He has information that I want."

Boba Fett leaned backward. Light rolled across the surface of his visor. "So? Ask him."

"He may not wish to tell me."

"And that's where I come in?"

"Exactly."

The bounty hunter remained silent for a full thirty seconds. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because I've heard of Katarn. Some say he's aligned with the Empire, while others claim he works for the Alliance."

"So? You've done work for the Empire."

"True, but the Alliance has been on a roll of late. Who knows? They might come out on top. Either way, I'll sit this one out."

"That's your final word?"

"That's it."

8t88 stood and stepped into the aisle. He was about to leave when Fett cleared his throat. "One more thing."

The droid turned. A ball joint squeaked in protest. "Yes?"

"Get a lube job."

Kyle Katarn tossed his drink back, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and triggered the cube. The holo played for what? The fifth time? The man with the beard was his father- and the boy was him. A younger, more innocent him before he left for the Imperial Military Academy on Carida, before the Imperials murdered his father, before the raid on Danuta's research facility. Five years had passed since then- though it seemed like fifty- and the search went on. Who had murdered his father? He, she, or it would pay dearly for the mistake. Maybe this was the night the truth would be known.

The holo flickered. Morgan seemed transparent, but his words were warm and strong: "I want you to remember, son, when you're at the Academy, how very proud I am of you."

Something squeaked as a droid slid into the far side of the booth. The synthesizer sounded flat and unemotional. "How touching."

The holo disappeared. Shadows hid Kyle's eyes. He removed the tiny tracker droid from his pocket, pressed the button on its back, and allowed the device to scuttle away. It sought 88's leg, activated an internal magnet, and went to work. If the larger droid felt anything, he gave no sign of it.

"Don't waste my time, 88. You called this meeting. Who killed my father?"

8t88 switched to infrared, checked to see if the bounty hunters had taken their places and saw they hadn't. Blast the idiots anyway! Boba Fett would have arrived on time. He cursed the human's intransigence. All he could do was stall. "When someone desires information, they come to me."

Kyle brought the pistol up from the darkness. Light

rippled along the top surface of the barrel. "And?"

The droid spoke quickly. "Patience. He's a Dark Jedi."

The hand weapon remained as before, only centimeters from 88's scanner plate.

"Jedi?"

"Dark Jedi. He is known as Jerec. He has great plans for the rebirth of the Empire."

8t88 saw two green blobs appear in the booth beyond. Help, such, as it was, had arrived.

Kyle felt his heart beat a little bit faster. Jerec! The same Jerec who had attended the graduation ceremony at Cliffside! The same Jerec who had sought him out, pinned the medal to his chest, and spoken as if to an old acquaintance?

*"Greetings, Kyle Katarn. You have accomplished a great deal for one so young. Recognition is sweet, is it not? However, remember that recognition is a gift given by those who have power to those who don't. This is but the first step ... Climb the ladder swiftly, join those who possess power, and claim what is yours. I will be waiting."*

Kyle hadn't been aware of it at the time, but his father had been killed weeks before. Was Jerec aware of that? Not only aware of it but of the reason for it? Had Jerec murdered his father?

The Rebel had no more than framed the question when someone rammed a blaster into the base of his skull. Something or someone laughed, and 88 made a clicking noise. "Ouch! That looks uncomfortable. I'll take the blaster so nobody gets hurt."

Kyle released his grip on the weapon and watched the droid place it on the far side of the table.

"Now, where were we? Oh yes, our friend Jerec. He has many plans, Jerec does. Unfortunately, you don't factor into any of them. But I'm not without a heart. Oops! My mistake . . . I am without a heart! Still, I might allow you to live, if you answer my questions."

8t88 held up a disk. It was approximately six centimeters in diameter and gleamed in the light. "Look familiar? Well, it

should. I found dozens of them in your father's home."

Kyle made a grab for the disk, but hands held him back. The droid didn't seem to notice. "I'm pretty good with codes, but this one eludes me. Perhaps you'd be so kind as to provide some advice. Or shall I allow my friends to indulge the darker aspects of their personalities?"

Kyle eyed the disk and wondered what was on it. "The dark side? I've been there. Do your worst."

8t88 shook his head. "Too bad. What's the saying- 'Like father, like son'? Not a very pleasant thought, given the way your father ended his days. Have a nice evening."

The droid slid sideways, got to his feet, and made for the door. Someone chuckled as another body took the recently vacated seat. It was a Gran, and all three of his stalk-mounted eyes were bloodshot.

His voice sounded like a gravel crusher stuck in low gear. "Remember me? It took three months for that blaster burn to heal."

"Can't say that I do," Kyle replied honestly, "but the streets are filled with trash and it's hard to tell one piece from another."

The Gran was just starting to respond when Kyle reached over his shoulder, grabbed the second bounty hunter, a foul-smelling Rodian, and yanked. The diminutive alien arced through the air and slammed onto the table. The blaster took on a life of its own. It slid across the well-worn surface and into Kyle's hand. The Gran blinked in quick succession. "You'll never leave here alive. Nar Shaddaa will be your grave!"

Kyle grinned. "I'm not interested in leaving. Not till I conclude some business with 8t88..."

The bounty hunters watched the Rebel slide out of the booth, get to his feet, and back away. "Thanks for everything. Let's have lunch sometime."

Nobody laughed.

Jan Ors guided the *Moldy Crow* down through the upper reaches of the city. There were all sorts of navigational

hazards- spires, gantries, platforms, and sky bridges- all of which had been constructed for the convenience of those who owned them, without regard for the public good. It seemed as though an entire constellation of red warning lights floated around her. Not to mention the sometimes-deceptive signs that might guide pilots to their destination, or into an isolated cargo bay where they would be murdered and their cargos stolen.

Not that the *Crow* was likely to attract much attention, especially in light of her lowly status and battered appearance. Originally commissioned as a freighter, she had filled many roles since then and had suffered in the process. She was Corellian-built, though, faster than she looked, and armed to the teeth, just right for the sort of jobs the Alliance assigned to its network of agents.

Jan frowned, bit her lower lip, and killed forward motion. The globeshaped drone-ship rose like a bubble from the bottom of the sea. Repulsors strobed the darkness below as lights circled its vast midsection. Static crackled over the cockpit speakers as the other vessel climbed and cleared the nearby towers. Lightning stabbed a distant tower, causing the view screen to darken.

Jan checked her sensors, peered into the night, and eased the ship forward. The Rebel agent hadn't gone more than a hundred meters before a formation of three ships hurtled past. Turbulence threw the *Crow* sideways, and Jan fought for control.

A voice blasted her ears. "This ain't no parking lot. Fly it or park it."

The ships, two TIE fighters and a TIE bomber, were gone before Jan could reply. The Imperials- and there was no shortage- were as arrogant as ever. The Empire might be on the ropes somewhere, but there was no evidence of it in the vertical city. Fighting them, and what they represented, had consumed most of her life, a life that would have come to a premature end on Rebel-occupied asteroid AX-456 had anyone but Cadet Leader Kyle Katarn led the raid to recapture it.



Kyle's act of mercy and their subsequent friendship had formed the basis of a successful partnership, one in which he always found new ways to get into trouble, and she to bail him out. When she was allowed to, that is.

The trip to Nar Shaddaa served as an excellent example. Jan had opposed the idea and believed she had talked Kyle out of it only to discover that he had gone without her. What would she find? Some crusty remains? A full-fledged firefight? Or the little boy "why worry about me?" act? There was no way to know. Kyle was good at any number of things, but teamwork wasn't one of them.

A remote-controlled landing drone appeared, ordered Jan to follow, and drew her toward the public landing platforms. Lights strobed, and she followed it in.

Kyle pulled a small comm set from his hip pocket, put the plug in his ear, and heard a clicking sound. It grew weaker when he turned right and stronger when he angled to the left. 88 and the tracker that had attached itself to his leg were on the move. There was a steady flow of foot traffic, and the Rebel shouldered his way through.

A Twi'lek passed by his robes shimmering as he argued with an Ithorian herd merchant. There was no way to know who or what rode in the heavily curtained sedan chair, only that he, she, or it must have been heavy, judging from the construction droids chosen to support the load.

An Imperial officer appeared, his rank hidden beneath a cloak, closely followed by his Commando bodyguards. Kyle felt his stomach muscles tighten and allowed his hand to stray toward the cross-draw holster at his waist. The vertical city recognized no authority save its own, and the Empire wanted him for desertion, treason, murder, and other crimes too numerous to mention.

Kyle bumped into a long-nosed Kubaz, ignored the invective directed at his back, and passed a bank of turbo-lifts.

The clicking lost some of its urgency. The Rebel did an about-face, forced his way onto an already packed platform,

and felt his stomach do a somersault as it surged upward. Where was 88 headed, anyway? There was no way to be sure, but the launch platforms were up above, and that suggested a ship. Once 88 was gone, it would be next to impossible to recover the disk.

The clicking grew louder and settled into an unbroken tone. The droid was close, very close, yet beyond his reach. The agent swore under his breath as the platform coasted to a stop and paused while a female Whiphid stumped aboard. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the turbolift resumed its journey.

Kyle waited for the words "Launch Deck Three" to appear on the entry arch and jumped when they did. The tracker was so loud that Kyle removed the receiver from his ear. The tiny comlink made an excellent substitute. There was no way to tell if Jan was in the vicinity. But he would hear when and if she called. The Rebel craned his neck, saw his quarry disappear through a circular portal, and hurried to intercept.

8t88 had composed five different lies to account for his failure. Which would Jerec believe? The droid wondered as he stepped through a portal and descended a short flight of stairs. He was forced to pause. The clones were human, wore little more than rags, and were linked by short lengths of chain. They were miserable creatures with even less freedom than the average droid. A Gamorrean guard issued a steady stream of grunts, snorts, and burping noises. The prisoners kept their eyes on the deck.

While 8t88 waited for the slaves to pass, the brighter of his two bodyguards, a heavily muscled specimen who went by the name of Grentho, saw something and bent to examine it. The tracker clung stubbornly at first, popped free, and tried to escape.

The human clamped the scorpion-shaped device between a heavily callused thumb and a nic-i-tain-stained forefinger. "Hey, boss! Look what I found on your leg!"

8t88 recognized the tiny machine instantly, instructed the

bodyguard to destroy it, and took a quick look around. Kyle Katarn appeared as if on cue, moving to intercept. The tracker squealed as Grentho ended its mechanical life. Windblown grit peppered 88's alloy skin.

Klaxons sounded as an Imperial shuttle invaded the bay. Like most of his kind, 88 liked precision. The fact that the ship was on schedule pleased him. Various kinds of comm units had been incorporated into the droid's body and he used one of them to make contact with the pilot. "Punctuality is a virtue, Lieutenant. I shall see that your superiors hear of it. There's no need to land. Just lower the ramp."

The shuttle roared obediently and moved in over the ramp. Kyle drew his weapon, made the leap to the platform below, and yelled over the noise. "What? Leaving so soon?"

Sparks flew as the ramp touched the deck. 8t88 felt a sudden desire to taunt the human. He removed the disk from a storage compartment and waved it over his head. "Is this what you want? Come and get it!"

The bodyguards were reaching for their weapons when Kyle fired. The energy bolt removed 88's arm with almost surgical precision. The droid watched in disbelieving horror as the now-severed limb cartwheeled through the air, spewing hydraulic fluid in every direction, and clanged on the deck.

Kyle watched the arm roll to the edge of the platform, wobble, and disappear. The disk, still contained within the droid's tightly clenched fist, went along for the ride.

8t88 grabbed for his stump, located the arterylike tube, and pinched it off. A stormtrooper appeared, wrapped an arm around 88's midsection, and helped the droid up the ramp. The walkway cleared the platform and started to retract.

An energy bolt blipped past Kyle's shoulder, grazed a passing Weequav, and scorched the bulkhead beyond. The none-too-intelligent creature roared his outrage, swung his pike at a group of Bith sand artists, and triggered a stampede.

Kyle fired in return. Grentho threw his arms out as if to welcome a friend and toppled over backward. Smoke eddied from the hole in his chest.

The second bodyguard fared better at first. She made it onto the ramp and was headed for the lock when a storm-trooper shot her in the face. She tumbled backward, fell off the ramp, and smashed into the platform below.

The shuttle rose on brightly flaring repulsors, turned, and headed away. Kyle took a parting shot, saw movement from the corner of his eye, and dived for cover. He was flying through the air, wishing that the deck was made of something softer than durasteel, when blaster fire scorched the platform behind him.

The shuttle was clear, and an Imperial TIE bomber had been dispatched to even the score. The platform smashed into his chest, and he struggled to breathe.

All Kyle could do was watch as the TIE bomber rose and swiveled in his direction. There was no place to hide. The Rebel stared into the laser cannon and waited for them to blink coherent light. He was still waiting when cannon fire struck the bomber from behind. It staggered and drifted into a wall. The resulting explosion lit the area, triggered various alarms, and activated the tower's emergency response systems.

Wall-mounted nozzles covered the wreckage with foam as rescue, medical, and hazmat droids walked, rolled, and, in one case, slithered to the rescue.

Still another ship descended into view, and Kyle, who was determined to go down fighting, lifted his weapon. He was about to fire when he recognized the ship's beaklike bow. Though not especially pretty, the *Crow* was a welcome sight.

Jan was worried, relieved, and angry -all at the same time. "You're always in trouble!"

The Rebel holstered his weapon. "Not after you bail me out."

The pilot grinned in spite of herself. "I saw the vultures

gathering over something and figured it might be you. How would you manage without me?"

Kyle scanned the still-smoking debris. "Perish the thought. I wouldn't last long, that's for sure."

Cockpit alarms started to sound, and Jan checked her screens. "More company on the way. Jump on the ramp, and we'll make a run for it."

Kyle shook his head. "Thanks, but no thanks. Meet me at the top! The disk fell off the platform. I'm going after it."

Jan wanted to ask, "What disk?" Wanted to find out what made it so important. But she knew Kyle wouldn't take the time to tell her. Darn him, anyway. He was brave to the point of recklessness and eternally out to prove himself even when the tests were over first, at the Imperial Military Academy, and later within the Alliance, where his long list of accomplishments was credential enough, or should have been.

All of this and more passed through Jan's mind in the twinkling of an eye. Someday there would be time to talk, but not now. Assuming they lived that long. "Roger that. Be careful. I'll see you at the top."

The *Crow* spun on her axis, paused, and moved away.

Kyle scanned his surroundings, spotted a likely looking maintenance ladder, and jogged in its direction. It was a sturdy affair, made of durasteel and welded to an outer wall. On closer examination, Kyle saw that the ladder had been built to accommodate bipeds and, judging from the track mechanism mounted beside it, a highly specialized maintenance droid. What if he got halfway down and the droid arrived?

The Rebel looked up, looked down, and debated what to do. This decision, like so many, was taken from his hands. The stormtroopers doubletimed onto the far side of the platform, paused, and waited for orders. The ranking NCO had a parade ground voice and liked to use it. "All right, men spread out and find him! There's a price on his head—so you could be rich by morning."

The noncom's words were more than sufficient motivation. The stormtroopers had been summoned from nearby nightspots and, though not entirely sober, were adequate for the task at hand.

Kyle took one look, swung over the abyss, and located the first crosspiece with his feet. The rungs were close together- as if to accommodate beings with shorter legs- and ice cold. The Rebel wished he had gloves and pulled his hands into his sleeves, using them for insulation.

The city rose around him as the agent lowered himself into the depths. With a slight turn of his head, Kyle could see all manner of vertical structures, their cylindrical, rectangular, and even trapezoidal shapes connected by sky bridges, causeways, and arches. Everything was so intertwined that Kyle had the impression of multiple trunks all rising from a common set of roots, as if the entire city was part of a single organism on which a wide variety of symbiotes and parasites managed to flourish. And what did that make him, he wondered? A momentary infestation?

The thought amused him. He almost laughed aloud when an unexpected blast threatened to tear him loose. At least it felt like a blast, although there was nothing natural about the behemoth that caused it or about the way the air pummeled Kyle's body.

The ship was far too large for use within the narrow confines of Nar Shaddaa's lower canyons and had been pressed into use without regard for the safety of those who lived in the surrounding towers. A searchlight swept across Kyle's body, paused on the wall beyond, and came back again. A voice was amplified and audible over the ship's repulsors. "Hey, you! The man on the ladder! Hold it right there!"

Kyle ignored the order and increased his rate of descent. A rectangle of white light appeared and was gone. Kyle had the impression of a woman dressed in white, a Mon Calamari officer, and a chromeplated droid. They all looked surprised, and the woman, if she was typical, frightened.

The people on the ship were annoyed. Cannon fire rippled

across the wall beneath Kyle's boots. He had no choice but to climb, even if that meant going to the landing platform above. Or did he? Kyle climbed up to the window, paused, and peered into the room. The occupants had fled.

Whoever commanded the ship took exception to the pause and fired. Kyle scrambled upward, heard the transparisteel windows shatter, and saw lights appear. Stormtroopers? No, a maintenance droid, sent to knock him clear.

The ship, unable to hold its position for more than a few seconds, had fallen two or three stories and was in the process of rising again. Kyle lowered himself downward, eyed the window, and made the sideways leap.

The maneuver was more difficult than he'd thought it would be. His arms hit the windowsill, his legs kicked the wall, and the ship hovered meters away. It was so close that he might have been able to see the crew's faces. What were they doing? Waiting for him to fall?

The droid, well aware of its circumstances, wailed as it roared by. The crash came five seconds later. The vessel was so huge, so overpowering, that it took every bit of Kyle's courage to throw a leg over the sill, ignore the cuts he had suffered, and pull himself into the recently devastated apartment. The ship addressed him via the loudspeakers. He waved in hopes that they would continue to hold their fire.

Debris lay everywhere, holes had been punched through walls, and a fire burned in one corner of the room.

There was nothing graceful about the way he tumbled through the window, scrambled toward the still-open door, and threw himself through it. He was barely through when the ship fired. The recently vacated apartment seemed to explode.

Kyle made it to his feet, sprinted down the hall, and heard the ship continue to fire. Windows shattered, walls vanished, and kitchens exploded as the Imperials probed the inside of the building. How many had died? The Imperials neither knew nor cared.

The corridor came to an end; the agent slipped into a fire escape and made his way downward. The attack and the noise that accompanied it gradually died away.

It was tempting to take a moment to reflect on what he'd been through, to check whatever wounds he'd sustained, but Kyle knew better than to do so. The Imperials would stop at nothing, and reinforcements were on the way. He took the stairs two at a time.

Kyle considered using the turbolifts after three or four floors but knew they would be dangerous and settled on the stairs, drop tubes, and ladderways instead. And he was not alone. Over time, other beings had been forced into the city's back ways. Now they called them home.

Still, threatening as some of them were, most had no desire to mix it up with the wild-eyed lunatic who came careening out of the dark, blood clotting along one side of his face, clothes hanging in shreds.

They appeared like snapshots, their expressions of fear, hatred, or surprise forever burned into Kyle's memory as they peered out of tunnels, bared their fangs, or jumped out of his way. Gravity and his own inertia pulled him downward.

There wasn't much time to think, to analyze his progress, but certain things were obvious. The city was constructed in layers. By descending into Nar Shaddaa's depths, Kyle was traveling back in time.

The metal beneath his boots took on a different ring as old alloys replaced new.

The ever-present graffiti transitioned from standard to alien hieroglyphics and back again. Murals spoke through layers of grime, telling stories of a people so wealthy, a culture that held art in such high esteem, that it beautified even the most insignificant of passageways.

Wreckage, including the hull of an ancient spaceship, spoke of hard times, too, when someone or something had been shackled to wellanchored ring bolts and spent days scratching its name into the wall.

The farther Kyle went, the warmer it became, so warm



that moisture ran down the walls, rust coated everything in sight, and his clothes hung heavy on his body.

The source of the warmth was no mystery. As Kyle neared the moon's surface, he entered the realm of the city's massive exhaust ports. Built to vent the excessive heat thrown off by Nar Shaddaa's antiquated power plants, the stacks were one of the reasons why the city's residents had pushed their structures up and away from the moon's rocky surface.

Sweat poured off Kyle's body as he made his way down ancient stone stairs, passed through a shattered gate, and stepped over a strangelooking skeleton. The Rebel activated a glow rod and played the beam on the area in front of him.

Water was everywhere, dripping, gurgling, and gushing, as if part of a conspiracy to mask the sounds his enemies made. The agent swallowed and drew his blaster. Its weight was comforting.

A series of left-hand turns carried the Rebel away from the tower and out into a gap. An exhaust stack rose to Kyle's left, the remains of what appeared to be a temple appeared on the right, and a plaza opened in front of him.

The rain was warm and sticky. It soaked Kyle's hair and ran down his face. Moving cautiously, his eyes probing for movement, the agent edged his way forward. A landscape composed of puddles surrounded him. The rain churned them into miniature oceans with waves that dashed every which way.

Light gleamed off something, and Kyle used the back of his gun hand to wipe water from his brow. The glow rod wavered, touched something, and returned. Could it be? Yes, there it was! 88's arm was stump-down and fistup! The disk glowed with reflected light.

Kyle splashed his way forward and was reaching for the disk when a Trandoshan exploded out of the water next to him. He was armed with a vibroaxe and knew how to use it. It seemed that what the Rebel had taken for a puddle was a good deal deeper, deep enough to hide a bounty hunter.

Kyle turned in the direction of his attacker, raised the

blaster, and felt it struck from his hand.

The Trandoshan was proud of the manner in which he had disarmed his opponent on the upswing and planned to cleave the human's skull on the downstroke. One blow, one kill. Now, that's the way of the warrior!

Kyle, who had no desire to be split like a piece of firewood, dived to the side. He saw 88's arm and took it with him. Water broke the Rebel's fall, sprayed sideways, and rushed back in.

Furious at the manner in which the cowardly human sought to avoid what the bounty hunter saw as a righteous and well-deserved deathblow, the Trandoshan charged.

Kyle turned onto his back and instinctively raised his hands. The vibro-axe made a clanging sound as it hit 88's arm. The Trandoshan roared, raised his weapon, and went cross-eyed as Kyle kicked him between the legs.

The resulting splash brought help from the shadows. "Porg? Is that you? What's going on?"

Kyle swore, grabbed the bobbing glow rod, and turned it off. The agent felt the seconds tick away as he groped for the weapon's familiar outlines. Then he remembered the trick, the one he'd learned by accident and had used in the Rimmer's Rest. Would it work?

The agent forced himself to concentrate, to step outside his fear and feel the blaster in his hand. Suddenly it was there, butt-first, ready for use. He brought the weapon up out of the water and wondered if it would fire.

The Aqualish carried a light-mounted blast rifle and stomped out into the open as if he owned the place.

Kyle aimed just above the light, shot the bounty hunter in the chest, and watched the bolt bounce away. Body armor! A head shot, then-

The Trandoshan sat up. It was a poor decision. The Aqualish fired first the human second. The Trandoshan took both bolts. Water boiled around the still-functioning vibro-axe.

The Aqualish was not only surprised but momentarily taken aback and paid the price. Kyle shot him in the head,

paused to make sure of the kill, and took a moment to pry the disk out of 88's still-clenched fist.

Then, with the shouts of even more reinforcements ringing in his ears, Kyle decided to run. He knew the glow rod could betray his position. But he was forced to use it. It was either that or injure himself on unseen obstacles.

Kyle splashed through an ancient cemetery, wove between the rainsmoothed tombstones, and aimed for a dimly visible arch.

The noise was barely noticeable at first but grew in volume until it shook the ground under Kyle's feet. Thump. Thump! THUMP! It sounded like a heartbeat, as if the moon was alive and Kyle had discovered its pulse.

The source of the sound was a mystery at first but gradually revealed itself to be an upward spiraling ramp, outlined by widely spaced lights. It quickly became apparent that the conveyor belt emerged from deep within the planetoid's crust, followed the ramp upward, and delivered ore to the loading docks high above. Kyle had heard of the mines and knew they played an important part in Nar Shaddaa's history but had no idea that they were still operational.

While the Rebel didn't care about the mines or the ore they produced, the conveyor belt had definite possibilities.

He passed under the arch and climbed over piles of quietly rusting parts which, like the bones of some extinct monster, lay strewn where a machine had fallen fifty years before. Once free of their brooding presence, he headed straight for the point where the conveyor belt emerged from underground. A carefully sealed metal housing prevented access.

The agent located a ladder. It vibrated in sympathy with the machinery above. Kyle climbed quickly, arrived on a maintenance platform, and paused to check his back trail. Lights, it seemed like two or three, bobbed as they passed through the cemetery. Kyle swore and turned toward the belt.

The ore was reddish-orange in color and was moving at

two or three kilometers an hour. Jumping onto the belt would be relatively easy. But then how to escape? He glanced over his shoulder. The lights were closer now the first had cleared the cemetery.

Kyle secured his blaster and jumped.

The TIE fighters attacked the *Crow* within minutes after it cleared the tower. There were two of them, and, like the TIE bomb she had destroyed minutes before, they showed an amazing disregard for the safety of Nar Shaddaa's citizens. More of the same old arrogance, or desperation born of recent defeats? It was an interesting question but one best saved for later.

Jan put the *Crow* into a right-hand turn, placed the bulk of a large tower between the fighters and herself, and applied more power. Lights blurred meters away, and her back blast shattered a row of windows.

Sweat beaded Jan's forehead. What now? She couldn't fly in circles forever. There had to be a better way. Then she saw it, a distant spire still under construction, the top twenty floors waiting for walls.

Jan bit her lip as she dived into a well-lit canyon. The first TIE fighter cleared the building, tried a deflection shot, and missed. One end of a sky bridge sagged and fell. The free end slammed into a building, severed the last connection, and disappeared into the abyss.

Jan wondered how many had died and continued to pull the Imperials away. She zigzagged between buildings, opened a lead, and struggled to extend it. A few extra seconds. That was all she needed.

The spire soared toward space, a monument to someone's ego and the perfect place to hide. Jan killed the *Crow's* navigational lights, put the ship into a sweeping curve, and approached the building from the other side.

It took every bit of her skill to dump the right amount of speed, guide the ship into a rectangular slot, and put her down.

The TIE fighters swept past the building, failed to spot her,

and circled back. They were slower this time and more methodical but were looking for the wrong thing- a ship in flight. Jan waited, hoping to escape.

Then, one of the fighters spotted Jan- or, more likely, the heat generated by her engine- and came to investigate. Jan gritted her teeth, waited for the Imperial to fill the rectangle in front of her, and fired her cannon. The TIE fighter exploded. Flames blocked the Rebel's primary escape route.

Knowing the other ship would find her unless she moved, Jan lit the *Crow's* repulsors and eased her sideways. There was a grating noise as the top surface of the hull scraped against the ceiling, followed by silence as the agent made the necessary adjustment and looked for a way to escape.

Energy flared as TIE fighter number two spotted the Rebel and fired. There wasn't much Jan could do, unless-

As in all of Nar Shaddaa's high-rise buildings, there were turbolift shafts toward the center of the spire. Large turbolift shafts, capable of transporting tons of supplies to the levels above. This building was no exception.

Jan slid the *Crow* into one such shaft, heaved a sigh of relief, and blasted upward. The TIE fighter, still in position and still blasting away, seemed completely unaware as the Rebel vessel emerged from the top of the building and circled down. Cannons fired, and the TIE fighter hit the side of the building, exploded into flames, and fell like a comet. The wreckage lit the canyon below.

Kyle stood knee-deep in ore, ducked to avoid a cross brace, and stared up through the gloom. He blinked as the rain hit his eyes. What was that structure, anyway? A cover- or something a good deal more ominous? Whatever it was made a lot of noise, as if the ore was being crushed, or forced through some kind of sorter.

Much as the agent had enjoyed the ride, he had no desire to get tangled up with the machinery. He waited for the next cross brace, jumped as hard as he could, and managed to get a grip. He did a chin-up, threw one leg across the girder, and pulled the rest of his body over the top.

A quick scan revealed a catwalk twenty meters away. All Kyle had to do was walk the length of the beam and climb aboard. He made the mistake of looking down. It was a long, long way. Lights bobbed as his pursuers climbed a maintenance ladder.

The Rebel swore, scooted along the beam, and transferred to the catwalk. It was a good decision, one that allowed him to travel faster. The catwalk led Kyle to a ladder which gave access to a maintenance platform and a nearby freight lift. Finally! Something he could rest on.

A wave of fatigue rolled over Kyle, and without the constant flow of adrenaline to keep him going, he collapsed in a corner. The lift stopped occasionally to allow a droid on or off, but there were no signs of pursuit. Did that mean what Kyle hoped? That he had worn em down? That the chase was over?

The platform slowed, the words "roof access" appeared on the indicator panel, and the lift came to a stop. Kyle struggled to his feet, waited for the doors to open, and peered outside. Nothing. He felt for the earpiece and the comm unit that it served. Both had disappeared, lost in the darkness below.

The doors started to close and buzzed when Kyle used his blaster to keep them apart. They sensed the resistance, opened, and allowed him to pass. The attack came without warning as a blaster bolt drilled a hole through Kyle's shoulder. He staggered and tried to respond but felt very, very tired. The blaster seemed so heavy that he could barely lift it. The bounty hunters were little more than a blur. He backpedaled, felt his shoulders hit the door, and waited for the shot that would end his life.

A voice sounded inside his head. "Go to the peace within. Nothing can touch you there. The Force will protect you."

Kyle had heard of the Force and instinctively knew that what he thought of as "the gun trick" relied on an energy source external to himself. That knowledge, plus extreme desperation, caused him to listen.

Kyle called on the Force, became one with it, and felt

events start to slow. There was time now, plenty of time in which to assess the bounty hunters arrayed before him, raise his weapon, and open fire.

The Rebel felt removed somehow, like a witness to someone else's life. He watched as a Rodian toppled, a Gamorrean fell, and a human collapsed.

A feeling of smug invincibility settled over Kyle as his enemies fell like wheat before a scythe. No one could stand before him! No one was as smart, as powerful, as . . .

Suddenly, and without warning, the slow, almost dreamy battle snapped into fast forward. An energy beam sizzled past Kyle's head and he understood his mistake. The Force was the source of his protection, not...

A grenade exploded, the deck disappeared, and his head struck metal.

Jan had landed on the platform three hours before but had been forced to leave as other ships arrived. Astronomical fees, levied by the minute, left her no other choice.

That being the case, the Rebel had returned every half hour or so, landing when she could, scanning the area and calling over the radio when she couldn't.

It was a boring, frustrating duty- the kind she always wound up with- all because the only thing worse than working with Kyle was working without him.

The *Crow* was on final approach when the grenade went off. Jan saw the flash of light and guessed the rest. Kyle had arrived, and someone wanted to stop him. She goosed the drives and tried the comm.

"*Crow* to Kyle, do you read me? Over."  
Silence.

Jan felt her heart beat faster, brought the *Crow's* weapons on-line, and pronounced a death sentence on anyone who tried to stop her.

The bounty hunters, those still standing after Kyle had thinned their ranks, heard the ship and turned.

There were three of them, and they, plus the body slumped against the elevators, were all Jan needed to see.

Blasters winked as the Rebel kicked the ship to the left, fired the bow cannon, and swung the nose to the right. Coherent light stuttered out, punched holes through the bounty hunters' chests, and scorched the deck beyond. They staggered, spun, and fell, all without coming anywhere near Kyle's motionless body.

The *Crow* settled over the bounty hunters' bodies like a bird on carrion. The ramp fell, and Jan exited holding a blaster in each hand. A bounty hunter, the only one still alive, saw the expression on the agent's face and continued to play dead.

Jan, careful to keep an eye on her surroundings, made her way over to Kyle's still-unconscious body, stuck one of the blasters in its holster, and used her free hand to check his pulse. It was thready but steady. As with many blaster wounds, the hole had been cauterized as the energy bolt passed through it, and while caked with blood, Kyle's skull seemed intact.

Jan gave a sigh of relief, stuck the remaining blaster into her waistband, and grabbed Kyle under the armpits. Her partner's head flopped up and down as the agent dragged him to the ship and up the ramp.

He was bigger than she, and Jan was forced to stop occasionally to regain her strength. Finally, with the ramp retracted and Kyle secured in a bunk, she lifted off. The *Crow* swung out over the abyss, rose toward the blackness of space, and left Nar Shaddaa behind. Kyle needed help – and Jan would find it.



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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The hospital ship *Mercy*, an antiquated Dreadnaught, two assault frigates, a squadron of Corellian gun ships, and assorted support vessel orbited a recently devastated world. Cities of colored glass, now reduced to rubble, merged with plains of heat-fused earth. This was just one of the many planets laid to waste during the last few years.

The *Mercy*, which had been "liberated" while still under construction, was enormous. More than two kilometers long and a quarterkilometer across, she could accommodate up to five thousand patients plus the equipment, droids, and staff needed to operate and maintain her.

In spite of her considerable size however, the *Mercy* was badly overcrowded. More than six thousand Rebel casualties were crammed into her hull. They filled her wards and spilled out into the passageways, where they stood, sat, or lay on improvised beds. Even worse was the fact that patients who should have been immersed in one of the vessel's 4,250 bacta tanks were forced to wait.

It meant older, less effective medical procedures had to be brought into play. And that meant some of the wounded would suffer permanent disabilities since the longer bacta therapy was delayed the less effective it became.

Jan felt a lump in her throat as she threaded her way through packed corridors and caught glimpses of bodies cut in half, heads without faces, and beings so burned she couldn't determine whether they were human or members of another species.

The fact that she wasn't immortal, that she could have been one of them, made her stomach queasy. Jan knew she'd never forget the *Mercy* corridors, the sacrifices her fellow Rebels had made, or the true price of freedom.

It took fifteen minutes to reach bacta ward 114. Three replacement units had been pressed into service and placed out in the corridor. They contained what remained of a gun ship's twelve-person crew. The ship, the GS-138, had been ambushed while on a top-secret raid. Debris and some life pods were all that remained when help arrived.

The survivors- including a man, a woman, and a male Mon Calamari were suspended in bacta and mercifully unconscious. Medals hung from the jury-rigged cables that connected their tanks to the ship's computerized monitoring systems. Notes, drawings, and snapshots were taped to the tanks.

A tired-looking medic turned to greet her. He was balding and slightly overweight. "Yes?"

"I'm looking for a patient named Kyle Katarn."

Although there was no outward sign of its special status, ward 114 was reserved for members of the Alliance's Intelligence and Special Operations contingents. Though not nice to contemplate, the fact was that some casualties were considered more important than others, and Kyle- a proven if not completely trusted agent- was on the list of those slated to receive highpriority medical treatment. That being the case, certain security measures were in place.

The medic considered himself to be something of an expert where cloak and dagger types were concerned. The civilian flight suit, nonstandard sidearm, and haunted eyes all pointed to one conclusion: a spy come to see a spy. They were jumpy at times, so it paid to be careful.

The medic kept his voice neutral. "May I see your I.D.?"

Jan produced her card and watched it pass through the reader. The medic checked the readout and nodded toward a hatch. "Your friend is in tank twenty-three. We'll pull him later today. That's good, you know. He'll be up and around soon."

Jan thanked the medic, triggered the door, and stepped within. A maintenance droid was working on an empty tank, and aside from gentle tool noises, the ward was quiet. The air had a tangy smell which might have been pleasant if it weren't for the sights that went with it.

The tanks were numbered and contained things Jan didn't really want to see, things that floated like specimens in jars. Some appeared intact, but others bore obvious wounds. The agent was glad they were asleep.

Tank 23 looked like those around it except for the fact that no one had left any medals or notes on it. Kyle floated there, his body curled into the fetal position, his hair drifting like seaweed. He looked innocent, more boy than man.

The agent approached the unit and placed her hands on the tank's transparisteel surface. It was cool and damp, like recently showered skin or the hull of a starship. Something caught at the back of her throat as Jan remembered the three long days during which Kyle's condition had vacillated between good and bad. She had stabilized the shoulder wound, but the concussion led to vomiting and periods of uncon-sciousness, symptoms the ship's rather limited medical references flagged as serious.

But they made it to Rebel-held space, and while Kyle entered bacta tank 23, Jan collapsed on a cot.

Twelve hours of sleep left her rested but concerned. She had no idea what Kyle had been up to in Nar Shaddaa or why he'd gone after the disk. This was not the sort of admission she wanted to make to their superiors. Especially when she was senior, and nominally in charge.

Each bacta tank had a small cupboard where personal items were kept. Jan knelt, tugged on the door, and pulled it open. Kyle's clothes were there along with his sidearm and boots. She rummaged through his pockets and came up with a wallet, a holo cube, and, yes, the mysterious disk.

Jan felt torn. It wasn't right to snoop through Kyle's belongings. But agents weren't supposed to have any privacy- not where their partners were concerned. In spite of the fact that Jan had complete trust in Kyle, it was hard to

convince others that they should feel the same way, especially at times like this.

She triggered the holo projector, watched Morgan Katarn bid his son good-bye, and bit her lower lip. The wallet came next. She had glanced through the contents and was about to return it when she saw something unexpected. The agent came across a 3-D snapshot of herself! How and when had Kyle obtained it? There was no way to know.

But the fact that it was there meant a lot.

Tears trickled down Jan's cheeks as she slipped the disk into her pocket, restored the rest of Kyle's belongings to the cabinet, and got to her feet. Her fingers left outlines on the transparisteel casing. The prints faded when she removed her hands. "I'm sorry, Kyle. I love you."

Then, walking fast, so as to complete the chore as quickly possible, Jan left the ward. The medic watched her go, wished someone cared enough to cry over him, and returned to his work. There were charts to update, and his boss would check to make sure they were done.

Jan spent the better part of two hours trying to access the disk's contents but finally gave up. The contents were encrypted, and she couldn't break through. She needed help, expert help, the kind of help resident on the flagship. Rather than request clearance for the *Crow* and fly the relatively short distance to the *New Hope*, Jan decided to take advantage of a regularly scheduled shuttle. The trip to the refurbished Dreadnaught took less than fifteen minutes.

Once aboard, the agent went in search of an old acquaintance, a friend of her father's, presently in charge of the flagship's Electronic Counter Measures section. His name was Chief Warrant Officer Yiong Wong, "Chiefy" to his friends and "that miserable old geezer" to those who abused his equipment and were caught at it.

She found Chiefy the same way she always did, by asking his subordinates where the trouble was and descending into the bowels of the ship. After that, it was a simple matter to follow a trail of temporarily abandoned tools through a crawl space and into a floodlit equipment bay.

The Warrant Officer, along with two of his techs, was hard at work. Cables squirmed into the space from five or six directions and converged on an open junction box.

Chiefy took one look at her, gave a whoop of joy, and offered to buy her lunch- a purely symbolic invitation, since anyone could enter the chow hall free of charge.

Jan accepted, ignored the stares, and followed Wong out. There was very little chance that he could access the disk. But he'd know people who could.

Kyle awoke between clean, crisp sheets. He remembered the bacta tank, but it was nowhere to be seen. Sleep pulled him down. He dreamt of his father's home, of Jan staring at him through a window, of a man he'd never seen before. The man had dark skin and wore a plain white robe. There was something about his voice, about the way that he spoke, that captured Kyle's attention.

"A crossroads lies before you.... The same man who murdered your father contemplates an even greater evil. His name is Jerec, and he seeks a place called the Valley of the Jedi, a place where thousands of Jedi spirits are trapped, a place of almost unbelievable power, a place he must never reach. Because if he does, the results could be catastrophic. Imagine someone who could destroy a star with a whisper, eradicate a solar system with a snap of his fingers, or 'think' a planet from its orbit.

"Your father gave his life to protect this place . . . and the power it contains. His destiny was linked with it . . . and your destiny is linked with his.

"Your apprenticeship has been underway for some time now. The disk will help you absorb the ways of the Jedi. Learn them well, and learn them quickly, for time is short."

Rahn faded from sight, strange-looking rock formations appeared, and Kyle struggled to see. The image steadied for a moment, slipped from focus, and faded away. The name Jerec meant something, but he couldn't remember what. Kyle was thinking about that, or trying to, when sleep pulled him down, again.



Chief Warrant Officer Xiong Wong used a hydrospanner to bang on the hatch. "Hey Wires, I know you're in there, so open up."

Silence.

Wong looked at Jan and winked. "Don't worry. I have a surefire way to get his attention." The spanner banged again. "Okay, Wires. Have it your way. Lieutenant Commander Olifer seems like a reasonable man. The fact that you have appropriated thirty-two percent of the tracking computer's excess capacity for your own personal gain won't bother him in the least."

The hatch jerked open, and a small man with a long, thin nose peered out. He had small, beady eyes.

They ran the length of Jan's body and flicked to Wong. "What's the problem, Chiefy? I'm busy."

"Busy running a virtual gambling casino," Wong said equably. "Not that I care, as long as your computer's combat ready."

"So? You came to tell me that?"

"No," Chiefy replied calmly, "I came to get your help on this." Wong held the disk between thumb and forefinger. Light winked off its surface. "It's read-protected, and my friend wants in."

Wires looked from the disk to the Warrant Officer's face. "I crack it, and you leave me alone?"

"Affirmative."

"And Olifer?"

"Remains blissfully ignorant until you get greedy and give yourself away."

"Done. Let's get on with it."

Jan spent the next two hours in the overcrowded storeroom which Wires had converted to his own nefarious purposes. There was little to nothing the agent could do to help, but she felt obliged to stay.

Partly because Chiefy had, and partly because Wires was clearly untrustworthy.

The computer expert knew what he was doing, but it was

slow going, nonetheless. First, he applied some off-the-shelf encryption software. It didn't work. More than a little angry now, and a good deal more engaged, Wires tried again. The next program he ran made use of software he had written himself.

Even that didn't work the first time through, although Jan did catch a glimpse of a middle-aged man who looked a lot like Morgan Katarn.

Finally, with a whoop of triumph, Wires made a partial breakthrough. It was like staring through a snowstorm, and the static made some of the words hard to hear, but there was no mistaking what was said.

Jan swore both men to secrecy, took the original and the partially decoded copy, and gave Chiefy a hug. Wires looked as though he would have enjoyed a hug, too, but was forced to settle for a handshake. The walk from the storeroom to the Dreadnaught's bridge was one of the longest Jan had ever made.

Like the Dreadnaught herself, the cabin dated back to pre-Imperial days and was extremely spacious-fitting quarters for an admiral whose duties were mainly ceremonial.

The ship had been something of a fixture over Churba, where it had functioned as an orbital war museum until it was "liberated" by the Rebels and refitted. There were no resources to squander on decor, however, which explained why the same tapestries that had graced the bulkheads prior to the Rebellion still hung there, adding to the somewhat musty smell. Mon Mothma had grown used to the odor, but Leia Organa, formerly Princess Organa, hadn't. She sneezed, and her brother, Luke Skywalker, said, "Bless you."

Mon Mothma, who was deeply engaged in a logistical problem, took scant notice. Sneezes and what people said about them were less important than medical supplies and the systems used to distribute them. Mon Mothma wore her hair short so as to minimize maintenance and preferred loose-fitting robes, worn with a single clasp or pin, to the

tunics and trousers that Leia favored. Perhaps it was a habit picked up during her years as a senator or- and this seemed more likely- it was a matter of comfort.

Whatever the reason, the administrator's robes swished this way and that as she strode back and forth.

"And so," she continued, "the efficient distribution of medical supplies not only will save lives, it will signal the government's priorities and our ability to deliver on them."

Luke, who knew he should care about such matters, struggled to pay attention. The administrative and political matters that Mon Mothma and his sister found so fascinating often left him cold or, more accurately, bored. That being the case, he looked hopeful when one of Mon Mothma's aides slipped into the compartment and whispered something into the administrator's ear. Any sort of distraction would be welcome. The administrator listened, nodded, and said something in return.

The aide left, and Mon Mothma turned to her guests. "Excuse the interruption, but it seems as though something rather urgent has come up."

Leia and Luke rose as if to leave, and Mon Mothma gestured for them to stay. "No. I would appreciate your opinions on this."

The hatch opened, and a woman entered. Leia noticed she was pretty, though not self-consciously so, and dressed in a civilian flight suit. The fact that she had passed through a security check and still wore a sidearm testified to her clearance.

Mon Mothma gave the newcomer a hug and turned to her guests. "Jan, this is Leia Organa and her brother Luke Skywalker... Leia, Luke, this is Jan Ors. It was Jan who, along with an agent named Kyle Katarn, stole the Death Star plans from the lab on Danuta."

Jan felt blood rush to her cheeks. Leia Organa? As in Princess Leia Organa? And Luke Skywalker?

The Jedi Knight? Both were famous. She wasn't sure what kind of reception she would get. But there was no mistaking their enthusiasm, the warmth of Leia's handshake, or the



grin on Skywalker's face as they circled the table to greet her.

"This is a real pleasure .... What you did took guts. And it saved a lot of lives. Thank you."

Jan blushed all over again, stammered something about how Kyle had carried out the most difficult part of the mission, and was glad when Mon Mothma brought the conversation back to the present.

"You have something to report? Something about a valley?"

Jan nodded. "It's called the Valley of the Jedi."

Luke sat up straight. "What did you say? The Valley of what?"

Alarmed and somewhat taken aback, Jan repeated the name. "The Valley of the Jedi . . . Why?

Have you heard of it?"

Luke looked thoughtful. "Yes, I've heard of it. First from Yoda. And then from others. None of them had actually seen it, though . . . and that makes me wonder."

Jan shrugged and held the disk up for them to see. "Well, Kyle's father thought it was real and left a message to that effect."

Leia frowned. "Thought it was real? What happened to him?"

Jan remembered the holo she and Kyle had seen on board the *Star of Empire* and winced. "The Imperials murdered Morgan Katarn and placed his head on a spike."

Luke raised an eyebrow. "He was beheaded? That's how they killed him?"

"I guess so. Does it make a difference?"

The Jedi's bionic hand strayed to the lightsaber at his side. "Maybe, and maybe not," he replied vaguely. "But it's my observation that beheadings are as rare as the weapons used to carry them out."

Jan was just starting to consider the implications of that when Mon Mothma gestured toward the disk. "Let's see what Katarn has to say."

Jan apologized for the quality and dropped the disk into a

player. What looked like a snowstorm swirled, static crackled, and an image appeared. The man had gray, almost white hair, and a full growth of beard. His eyes were kindly but tired. A workshop or similar area appeared in the background.

"This message is intended for my son Kyle Katarn -" crackle . . . pop, . . . crackle. . . "- Kyle, I have left two very important items for you. The first is a map to the Valley of the Jedi, which is embedded in the stone ceiling above this room. The other is a lightsaber that once belonged to a Jedi named Rahn. Use it well. Use it for good."

Mon Mothma knew Rahn and wondered where he was. Luke had heard of the Jedi from Yoda.

Leia broke the silence. "No offense to you or the Katarn family, but so what? Why should the Alliance get involved? Resources are scarce. They must be allocated with care."

Mon Mothma nodded in agreement.

Jan felt defensive. "The Imperials care, so we should care. They tried to keep the disk, lost it to Kyle, and fought to get it back. That's the best answer I can give."

Luke intervened before Leia could reply. "Listen to the legend, and you will understand."

Mon Mothma started to say something and thought better of it. Luke continued. "Hundreds and hundreds of years ago a Jedi named Kaan turned away from the light and formed the Brotherhood of Darkness. The Brotherhood used the dark side of the Force to build an empire and were well on their way toward expanding it when an army was raised to oppose them.

"The army of opposition consisted of beings from many species and planets, representing all walks of life. But they had one thing in common. They were Jedi.

"The two sides came together on a remote and little-known world. Salvos of pure energy were exchanged, storms raged across the land, and lightning flashed from the skies. Entire cities were destroyed, a species was pushed to the edge of extermination, and spirits separated from their bodies.

"Finally, after days of mortal combat, the Brotherhood was defeated. Knowing that he had lost but unwilling to accept defeat, Kaan lured his opponents into a valley. And it was there that the Brotherhood of Darkness committed suicide, taking good Jedi with them. Not to the freedom of death but into a state of suspended animation where they remain trapped.

"Their spirits should be released and allowed to merge with the Force, but there are those who would tap the energy they represent and use it for evil. Assuming the stories are true, assuming such a place exists, it would be well worth fighting for."

There was momentary silence as the rest of the group took the story in. Jan was the first to speak.

"Kyle will be up and around soon. We'll find the map."

Mon Mothma shook her head. "I don't think that's a very good idea, Jan. Kyle needs time to heal."

Leia saw the way Jan's eyes narrowed, the manner in which her mouth formed a hard, straight line, and knew the agent disagreed. What she didn't know was the extent to which Jan had matured over the last year or so, giving her the courage to challenge Mon Mothma's authority.

"With all due respect, agents are wounded all the time and thrown into action the moment they can walk. If this is about Kyle and the fact that he was an Imperial officer, then say so."

The fact that the agent in question had been a member of the Imperial military forces was news to Leia and Luke. They exchanged glances but remained silent. Mon Mothma felt no such compunction.

"All right, it may not be fair, but I don't trust him. He's a graduate of the Imperial Military Academy. How can we be sure of his loyalty?"

Leia looked from one woman to the other and said what she felt. "Han was a smuggler, and some say worse. He graduated from the Academy, yet you trust him. People can and do change."

Jan shot Leia a grateful look. It confirmed what Leia had

suspected all along. Jan Ors was in love with Kyle Katarn-for better or worse.

If Mon Mothma was annoyed, she gave no sign of it. "So, Luke, you've heard both sides of the issue. What do you think?"

The Jedi stared at the floor, lost in thought. His words came slowly, as if from a distance. "I think the second part of the message bears on the first. What did Katarn say? Something about a lightsaber that belonged to Rahn? The gift implies talent, talent and something more connections that I sense but can't put into words. I believe we can trust Kyle. The real question is whether he can trust himself. A self-taught Jedi? A great deal could go wrong. Still, the path is his, and he must walk it."

Mon Mothma looked thoughtful for a moment and turned to Jan. "Say nothing of this meeting. Allow Kyle to do as he will. If he's even half the man you say he is, all will be well. If he turns on us, kill him. Agreed?"

Kyle? Jedi? Was such a thing possible? And what about Mon Mothma's orders? Jan remembered Danuta- and the moment when she had pointed her blaster at Kyle's head. She hadn't been able to do it then. Could she do it now? Probably not. But she nodded anyway. "Agreed."

Leia saw the lie and allowed herself the tiniest of smiles. Life had never been, and never would be, simple.

Kyle hovered somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. He heard the medic enter the room, watched her through carefully slitted eyes, and maintained his silence. The shoulder wound felt better, much better, but he was in no mood to talk.

The medic glanced in his direction as if to make sure that the agent was all right and turned her attention to the officer in the next bed. Tubes snaked in and out of his body, and the respirator made a gentle wheezing sound as it pushed oxygen into his lungs. The medic checked to make sure everything was operating properly, tapped some readings into a datapad, and left the compartment.

Kyle allowed himself to drift and was just about to take still another nap when someone entered. The medic? Back already? He peered through half-closed eyes.

Jan came in, looked around, and approached the foot of his bed. She looked just plain wonderful -pretty in spite of the coveralls she wore, yet pensive, as if she was worried about something.

Kyle was about to greet Jan, to tell her he felt better, when she turned away. Two lockers, one for each patient, were bolted to the bulkhead. Jan opened Kyle's, removed his trousers, and slipped her hand into a pocket. Then, after placing a kiss on his forehead, she left.

Kyle waited to make sure she wouldn't return, swung his feet over the side of the bed, and got to his feet. The deck was cold and hard. He opened the locker, grabbed his pants, and checked the pockets.

Everything, including the all-important disk, was just as he'd left it. Or was it? What was Jan doing anyway? And if she had removed something only to replace it, what had it been? His wallet? The disk? The holo cube? And why?

The agent frowned, shucked his gown, and started to dress. The disk, the dream, and Jan. The pieces were in front of him. But how did they fit? The answer was out there- and he would find it.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

Sullust hung huge in the sky as Boc stood watching the troops guide the heavily loaded grav pallet up the ramp and into the shuttle's hold. The tiles were numbered and ready for reassembly. He shifted his weight and winced in pain.

The ache originated from the point where his tendon had been severed and reconnected. Boc favored his opposite foot as he turned to Yun. "That was the last load."

The younger Jedi nodded. "What now?"

"Here comes Sariss. Ask her."

Yun turned toward his mentor. "And to what fabulous destination are we bound?"

"To Baron's Hed" Sariss said, "So 8t88 can examine the map and try to make sense of it."

"Ah," Yun replied lightly, "and a fine piece of machinery he is .... Come, Boc. The bright lights beckon."

There was no answer.

Yun and Sariss turned to see where the other Jedi had gone. He stood with his back to them. His eyes scanned the countryside. Yun spoke again. "Boc? Come on, it's time to go."

"Someone is watching. I can feel it."

"So?" Sariss responded impatiently. "What did you expect? This is more activity than the locals have seen for a long time. We're hard to miss."

"The Force is strong in this one," Boc continued, "and he seeks to destroy us."

"Him and a few million more," Yun said dismissively. "Come. Lunch awaits."

"Into the shuttle, Boc," Sariss ordered sternly. "Jerec wants the map, and he wants it soon." Boc took one last look, turned, and shuffled toward the ramp. The remaining Jedi exchanged glances, shook their heads in wonderment, and followed.

Kyle couldn't hear what the Imperials were saying. And he didn't really care. From his vantage point up on the hill he could see the fields, the tap tree that stood in front of the house, and the Imperial shuttle that squatted beyond. Heat shimmered above the ship's hull and distorted the vehicle parked beyond. It contained a half-dozen transports, some gravsleds, and a mobile command post.

Timing was everything, or so the saying went, and his had been poor. The heavily loaded grav pallets meant that the Imperials had removed something. But what? Whatever it was would have to be a good deal more valuable than his father's tools and equipment to justify the expenditure of so many resources.

Kyle felt a momentary sense of pride. The Empire had murdered Morgan Katarn, but his impact lingered on.

It appeared as though the Imperials were preparing to leave. Some of them, anyway. The agent raised his electrobinoculars and took one last look. Two men and a woman stood in front of the shuttle.

They were Jedi, judging from the lightsabers they wore. But none was Jerec. Where was he anyway, the mysterious figure who had attended Kyle's graduation, murdered his father, and sent 8t88 to find him?

Close, very close, but out of reach.

Kyle touched a button and zoomed to maximum magnification. He examined each Jedi in turn. The woman wore bright red lipstick, the youngster displayed an "I'm better than you are" sneer, and the last was a Twi'lek, a rarity among Imperial forces. The alien turned toward Kyle. The agent felt his heart start to pound as he made contact with the space-black eyes.

Kyle lowered the electrobinoculars, certain that he'd been

discovered. But he realized that he hadn't. Not in the normal sense, anyway.

The others spoke to the strange-looking Jedi, and he turned away. Kyle felt light-headed and fought to control his breathing. The encounter had been frightening and exhilarating at the same time. Here was partial validation of his dream. Maybe, just maybe, he could become a Jedi- not the kind that murdered people but the kind that fought to protect them.

The Jedi, along with a contingent of stormtroopers, had boarded the shuttle by now, and the ship was lifting. Repulsors flared, the nose rotated toward the east, and thrusters fired.

Kyle went facedown as the shuttle passed directly over his position. Bushes swayed and dust filled the air. The Rebel looked back over his shoulder, spit grass, and was thankful when the spacecraft disappeared.

He stood, gave thanks that Jan hadn't been around to witness his rather undignified dive, and brushed grass off his clothes.

A quick check confirmed that although the Jedi had left, stormtroopers and mercenaries still patrolled the area around the house while an AT-ST minced through an unplanted field.

Tough odds, but not impossible ones, especially for someone who had spent his childhood there and knew every square centimeter.

Kyle checked his blaster, shoved it back into its holster, and moved along the side of the hill. Imperial troops had a strong tendency to do everything by the book, and having studied their books, he knew what to expect.

Sentries would be posted all around the structure to be defended. Not many, just enough to slow an incursion and call for reinforcements. Once that occurred, a heavily armed response force would rush to the area and provide whatever muscle was necessary.

That being the case, Kyle hoped to slip between the sentries and avoid the massive response. He stayed off the



well-established footpaths and took the sort of routes that only a child would be aware of, routes that were much more likely to be free of sentries, sensors, and trip wires. One such path, which was little more than a game trail now, required Kyle to get down on his stomach and elbow his way forward. Bushes closed over his head and brushed his sides.

The going was a good deal more difficult than he remembered. Of course, now he had an adult body, and the undergrowth had closed in on itself during his absence. The smells were the same, though, especially the yeasty odor of wild poro poppies and the sweet, almost nauseating scent of nantha blossoms.

Insects scurried to get out of his way. A harmless eye-eye snake hissed, aimed its head-eye in the direction of travel, and used the tail-eye to monitor pursuit.

A hole ball, its fur eternally matted with the debris that provided its camouflage, took one look at the enormous invader, gave a squeak of alarm, and rolled into one of its multitudinous holes.

Kyle smiled. All the creatures around him were old friends, or descendants of old friends, first encountered during his boyhood.

The undergrowth thinned, and the farmhouse appeared through the foliage. The Rebel squirmed his way forward, spotted a patch of telltale white armor, and ceased all movement.

The stormtrooper paused, scanned the surrounding area, and resumed his patrol. Kyle waited for the sentry to leave, pushed his way forward, and stuck his head out. The way was clear, except for a blaster-burned, agro droid.

Kyle dashed across the intervening space, tried the back door, and felt it open under his hand. The lock, such as it was, had been blasted away.

The kitchen was a disaster. Cupboard doors gaped open, graffiti covered the walls, and debris crunched under his boots. The agent paused, listened, and moved on.

It appeared as if the house had been ransacked on

repeated occasions. The Imperials had been first, followed by thieves who'd seen Morgan Katarn's head on display at the spaceport, then people with nothing better to do.

Someone had camped in the living room. A collection of dirty pots and pans was stacked next to the fireplace, and trash filled the northeast corner of the room. More than a little nervous, Kyle made his way to the front room and peered out the window. A Commando appeared, and the Rebel pulled back.

Getting in was one thing- getting out would be another. Still, no one had shown any inclination to enter the house, for which he was thankful. Perhaps most of them had been there already or had orders to stay out. Whatever the reason, it was fine with Kyle.

A trail of masonry drew a line between the much-abused front door and Morgan Katarn's workshop.

Kyle followed it until a picture caught his eye. It hung askew, as if ready to fall. Not too surprising, given what the place had been through.

Kyle walked over, removed the 3-D print from the wall, and gazed into his mother's face. He had a single memory of her- of being held in her arms, of crying over something, something that didn't seem so bad with her arms wrapped around him.

Tenderly, reverently Kyle removed the picture from its frame and rolled it into a cylinder. A scrap of wire served to secure the roll, which went into his right cargo pocket. It might take a beating during the hours ahead, but anything was preferable to leaving the print where it was.

The agent entered the workshop. His father and he had spent countless hours there, taking things apart, putting them back together, or just plain fooling around. The shop had been the center of the house and, in some ways, of their relationship.

A single glance was enough to determine that it, too, had suffered at the hands of the invaders. It appeared as though at least one minor explosion had taken place. The vast majority of his father's tools were missing, and a thick layer

of debris obscured the floor. of course, that was to be expected. But where had the ceiling gone? And why?

Kyle remembered the heavily laden grav pallets and wondered if the two were connected somehow.

But wait- what was that? A pattern on the remaining ceiling tiles?

Kyle removed a glow rod from his belt, climbed up onto an empty crate, and examined the area inquestion. He noticed that the tiles, none of which had been there on the day he left for the Academy, matched those on the kitchen counters. That meant they had originated in the same quarry: a place located twenty kilometers to the north. Etchings had been carved into the squares, some of which were clearly decorative, while others resembled a map, a map from which the central and most important section was missing.

What had Rahn said? Something about the Valley of the Jedi? Was that what the Imperials had come for? A snap that would guide them to the Valley? There was no direct evidence to support his theory, but Kyle felt it was true and had learned to trust such impressions.

The agent climbed down, directed the light into one of the darker corners of the room, and saw something familiar. It was covered with loose plaster but was recognizable, nonetheless. "Wee Gee? Is that you?"

There was no answer as Kyle made his way across the room, scooped chunks of plaster out of the way, and embraced a familiar figure. Though capable of a wide variety of configurations, the droid currently resembled an inverted U with a sensor pod mounted on top. Wee Gee boasted two graspers, one designed for strength and one intended for more delicate tasks. Kyle dragged the droid out into the middle of the room and checked its readouts.

"Hey, Weeg, what did they do to you? Whatever it was put some dents in your processor housing. No major damage, though. Let's check you out."

Morgan Katarn had built the droid himself, but Kyle had performed routine maintenance on the robot since the age

of twelve and knew its workings inside out. Beyond the dirt, grime, and dents, the machine was intact.

The half slots seemed unrelated to each other until Kyle rotated both of them into alignment and pushed the disk through the opening. Parts whirred, clicked, and hummed. A holo appeared, and with it, his father's image. It was crystal clear.

"This message is intended for my son, Kyle Katarn. Kyle, I have left two very important items for you. The first is a map to the Valley of the Jedi and is embedded in the stone ceiling above this room..."

Kyle watched his father gesture toward the once-smooth ceiling and knew his theory had been correct. Something whirred; the agent turned and pulled his blaster. Wee Gee remained motionless. A hatch opened in his side, and a cylinder popped out. The agent caught the object and the narration continued. "The other is a lightsaber that belonged to a Jedi named Rahn. Use it well. Use it for good."

The holo snapped out of existence. A feeling of warmth suffused Kyle's body. Not only would the new image replace the one of his father's head on a spike, it meant that his father had been aware of his talent and wanted him to develop it.

Kyle thumbed a switch, and the lightsaber popped to life. The air crackled, and the smell of ozone permeated the room. He made some experimental passes, gloried in the power that the weapon conveyed, and heard his father's words echo through his mind. *"Use it well.... Use it for good."*

The thought had a sobering effect, as did the knowledge that the Imperials had taken possession of information that his father had gone to great lengths to protect. He thumbed the power switch, felt the handle cool, and stuck the lightsaber through his belt.

There was a series of beeps and whistles. The agent turned to find Wee Gee floating two meters off the floor. The droid held a chunk of rock in his power grasper and seemed prepared to throw it. "Hey Weeg. It's me, Kyle."

The droid seemed doubtful and moved in for a closer look.

The beeps and whistles had a plaintive sound.

Kyle shook his head. "I look older because I am older. Not too old to remember how you fished me out of the river, though, and didn't tell Dad."

The droid responded with a series of quick, joyful sounds. Kyle patted the droid's sensor housing.

"You've been out of circulation for a while Weeg, and things have changed. I'd like nothing better than to see Dad again, but the Imperials murdered him. I'm fighting for the Rebs now."

It took the better part of five minutes to bring the droid up to date. Once that had been accomplished and Wee Gee had absorbed all the changes, it was Kyle's turn to ask the questions.

"So, Weeg, what's the deal with the ceiling? What made it so valuable that the imperials would take the time and trouble to tear it out?"

The droid directed its vid pickup toward the area in question and issued a long sequence of beeps and whistles. The Rebel made the necessary translation. It seemed that his father had taken a long trip and had seemed preoccupied on his return. It was as if he knew of something important but wasn't sure what to do about it. The droid continued.

"Later, after Master Rahn came to stay, your father worked on the ceiling. It took more than a month, and I helped. I liked the etchings. But your father must not have because he ordered me to cover them with plaster."

Kyle felt his heart beat faster. "Rahn? A man named Rahn came to stay?"

"Why, yes," the droid beeped. "A wonderful gentleman. Your father thought very highly of him."

Kyle's mouth was dry. "Describe Master Rahn."

Wee Gee projected a holo into the air. A lump formed in Kyle's throat as he watched the man he knew as Rahn hand a book and a lightsaber to Morgan Katarn. Their friendship was obvious. Kyle swallowed hard. In spite of all he'd learned, the main prize continued to elude him. Given the

fact that the shuttle had disappeared in the direction of Baron's Hed, that seemed like the place to start. But how to get there? Especially with Wee Gee in tow. Yes, he could leave the droid behind, but he knew what would happen. Wee Gee was like a member of the family, the only member left outside of himself, and couldn't survive on his own. No, there had to be a way ....

The answer popped into his mind as if it had been waiting there all along. Kyle snapped his fingers and motioned to the droid. "Come on, Weeg. Let's get out of here."

The towering tap tree that stood out front was more than ornamental. Its roots went down hundreds of meters, where they "tapped" an underground aquifer and brought water to the surface. More water than the tree and its various symbiotes could use. That being the case, Morgan Katarn and his neighbors had used the trees as biological pumps, diverting the excess water to their crops and supplementing the sometimes-inadequate rainfall.

However, bringing the water to the surface was one thing and distributing it to the crops was another. Like his neighbors, Morgan Katarn employed a force of droids to establish and maintain an extensive network of underground tunnels, pipes, and tubes, which took the wet stuff wherever it was needed. The system could be accessed from a number of locations, one of which was located not ten meters from the back door.

The agent made his way through the kitchen, pushed against the door in question, and peered through the crack. A stormtrooper stood five meters away. A mercenary sauntered up to greet him. The Gamorrean had green skin, a pig-style snout, and some nasty-looking tusks. He wore a bloodsucking morrt on each bicep, an indication that he had put a few credits aside and was coming up in the world.

He made some grunting noises, and the human responded, "Hey Brollo. It's been a while. You ready to lose this week's pay?"

The Gamorrean's response was lost as Kyle backed into the room. Which was more important, stealth or time? The

Rebel considered the Jedi, how easy it would be for them to leave the planet, and made the decision accordingly.

"Weeg, see the door? When I say 'go,' pile through it and turn to the left. Don't go right, 'cause you'll be in the line of fire. Got it?"

Servos whined as the droid positioned himself opposite the back door and beeped his readiness.

Kyle nodded, pulled his blaster, and took one last peek. The trooper had removed a datapad from his pocket and pointed at the screen. "So, who do you want? Your cousin Blotho or Master Sergeant Kine? The smart money's on Kine."

The agent pulled back. "Okay Weeg, ready... set....go!"

Kyle had expected the droid to pull the door open and was just as surprised as the imperials were when Wee Gee crashed through the wood, leaving nothing but splinters hanging from the hinges. There was no time to discuss the matter, however- and the strategy worked.

The Imperials were still recovering from the shock, still reaching for their weapons when Kyle shot them. The Gamorrean died first, his face registering surprise, and the trooper fell second. It took three shots to penetrate his armor, but the outcome was the same.

Kyle turned, pulled a quick three-sixty to ensure that the incident had gone undetected, and headed for the access door, which lay flush to the ground, where layers of dirt and debris served to camouflage it. Kyle found the handle and tugged. Nothing. It was jammed tight.

Wee Gee beeped, whistled, and moved into position. The droid's power grasper slipped through the handle, and a servo whined. Metal groaned as the door opened upward, and a set of stairs was revealed.

"Down the hatch," Kyle ordered, "and switch on your lights."

The droid beeped obediently and lowered itself into the underground passageway. Kyle pulled the door into a vertical position and ducked as it fell the last couple of meters. He'd be very lucky- or the Imperials extremely

stupid- if the hatch went undiscovered.

It was dark in the tunnel, or would have been if it weren't for Wee Gee and his floodlights. Together they lit up fifteen to twenty meters of tunnel.

The earthen walls still bore the tool marks left by the droids who had dug and subsequently maintained the tunnels. They weeped here and there as water from a recent rainstorm percolated downward.

Side tunnels, some of which were too small for the adult Kyle to negotiate, branched left and right. Black pipes or, in some cases, tubing followed them off into the darkness. The air was moist and smelled like dirt. This particular shaft, a passageway labeled "main central" led toward the northwest and the area where the vehicle park had been established. The perfect place to borrow some transportation...

The attack came without warning. The passageway was empty one moment and full the next. The war droid was a lumbering thing, long outdated but threatening, nonetheless. There was no way to know if it had been sent into the tunnels or had simply lost its way. Whatever the reason, the machine had sensed their approach, lain in wait, and lurched out of a side passage.

The machine could and probably would have killed Kyle within the first few seconds of combat, but Wee Gee was a more difficult opponent. Though extremely mild mannered and not equipped for combat, the droid had been programmed by Morgan Katarn to protect Kyle at all costs. That, plus the fact that Wee Gee had been built for heavy-duty farm work, evened the odds.

Metal rang on metal as the machines came together. The war droid boasted a variety of weapons but discovered it was too late to use them.

Kyle tried to see past Wee Gee, waved his blaster, and shouted advice- none of which was very useful.

The matter was really quite simple from Wee Gee's perspective. Lacking the programming and initiative to do anything else, his opponent was using tactics that might



have been effective against a human but were wasted on him.

While the war droid went for Wee Gee's nonexistent vital organs, Wee Gee used his power grasper to grab the other machine's throat and rip its head off. A column of sparks shot upward, a servo screeched, and the battle was over.

Wee Gee passed over the decapitated hulk, beeped a warning, and continued on his way.

Kyle shook his head in amazement, stepped on the war droid's chest, and followed along behind. Cautious now, with blaster drawn and mud sucking at his boots, Kyle waited for another attack. But, with the exception of a small cave-in, there were no more obstacles to bar the way. Wee Gee plowed through the blockage without difficulty and stopped when the tunnel came to an abrupt end. The whistles, beeps, and buzz ended with a nearly audible question mark.

"Now I reconnoiter," Kyle answered, indicating a ladder and the hatch above. "If memory serves, this should bring us out in the center of their vehicle park."

The droid's vidcam swiveled back and forth as various aspects of his programming came into conflict and made him nervous. The noises he produced were hard and demanding.

"Thank you," Kyle replied sincerely, "but my father is gone now, and I would appreciate it if you would accept my judgments in place of his."

There was a brief moment of silence while Wee Gee considered Kyle's request. The reply was both brief and contrite.

"Good," Kyle said firmly. "I'll take a look. You wait here."

The droid watched as the Rebel agent climbed the rusty ladder, shoved on the hatch, and shoved again. Kyle grimaced as metal screeched and the cover popped free. He waited to see if the noise drew any attention and was relieved when it didn't.

The agent pushed upward on the lid, stopped when it hit something solid, and squirmed through the gap. The

"something" was a transport. He'd been lucky, very lucky, since there were plenty of Imperials, and the vehicle hid him from view.

A pair of shiny black boots crunched by, a comm unit crackled, and someone coughed. Then, with a suddenness that made the agent's heart skip a beat, a shout was heard. Had he been spotted? The Rebel rolled this way and that, looking for someone to shoot...

But the boots, and the bodies above them, were running away. Running toward the house. Why?

Then it came to him. Someone had discovered the bodies and alerted the rest. How long before they found the hatch and followed the tunnel to the point where Wee Gee waited? Not very long.

Kyle knew that seconds were precious as he elbowed his way out from under the vehicle, took a quick look around, and saw nothing but backs as stormtroopers, mercenaries, and commandos headed for the house.

The T-4 was a large vehicle with an open cab. Normally used to move equipment and troops, it boasted a five-ton payload, light side armor, and a double-barreled, all-purpose energy cannon mounted behind the cab.

Kyle jumped onto the running board, climbed into the driver's seat, and scanned the dashboard. Like his classmates, he had qualified in T-4s during his second year at the Academy. The transport boasted no fewer than four repulsor-lift engines and, like most military vehicles, was secured with a key pad. A key pad which many company commanders chose to ignore since it meant that each and every potential driver had to memorize the necessary code. The factory setting consisted of four zeros. Many settings were just left that way.

Kyle mentally crossed his fingers, hit the zero button four times, and received a green light. The Rebel grinned as he flipped all four of the engineselect switches into the "on" position, hit the starter button, and heard the power plants whine into life. Each had its own special pitch that was soon lost in the sound made by the others.

Once the T-4 was up off its skids, it was a simple matter to slide out of the way and watch Wee Gee float up and out of his hiding place. The moment the droid was aboard and secured to his seat, Kyle took off.

A mercenary yelled something incoherent, the Imperials turned to look, and the chase was on ....

Blaster bolts sizzled past the agent's head, and one of them punched a hole through the windshield. Wee Gee issued a series of urgent whistles and beeps.

"Excellent advice," Kyle replied grimly. "Hold on to your circuits . . . because here we go!"

Empty and possessed of considerable power, the T-4 was capable of eighty kilometers per hour. It accelerated down the lane, spewed gravel in every direction, and roared onto the highway. Baron's Hed lay to the east, a thirty-minute drive at most.

The highway had seen heavy use, but that was before the Imperials imposed a system of travel permits and "usage-" based taxes. In order to minimize costs and defend against bandits, farmers used heavily armed convoys to take their crops to market and rode tax-exempt farm animals for local transportation. Animal droppings lined the side of the road, which was otherwise clear.

What had been a convoy appeared up ahead, the line of burnedout hulks attesting not only to the dangers that lay in wait but the extent to which the Imperials allowed bandits to terrorize the land.

Kyle turned into a curve and felt the T-4 tilt in order to compensate. A turnout provided access to what had been a rest area. It was currently home to a band of Tusken Raiders. Though they were native to the planet Tatooine, the Tuskens had been brought in by the Imperials to function as "enforcers," a role they relished. The mercenaries had taken to the speeder bikes like an Aqualish to water and used them to "patrol" the local roads.

None of them seemed to miss the bantha, the huge beasts they rode on Tatooine. An advisory had gone out within seconds of Kyle's escape, and the Tuskens were prepared.

Engines roared as they lurched into the air. Though vertical when parked, the long, sleek machines quickly went horizontal and formed on their leader, a Raider named Rogg.

Rogg knew his followers would be looking to him for encouragement. He waved a hand over his head and screamed a tribal war cry. It was lost in the slipstream. But it made him feel better.

The Tusken enjoyed his leadership position, liked the power it conveyed, but didn't relish moments like this. Rogg regarded the notion of leading from the front as impractical, especially since said leader eventually got killed, resulting in the loss of his valuable knowledge and experience, not to mention his life.

The Tusken leader had opened the matter for discussion, hoping the rest of the band would see how silly the traditional system was, but had been blocked by Bordo, his nominal number two, and one of two or three individuals who hoped to inherit his position.

Ah well, the charm pouch he wore around his neck had protected him this long and would again. The Tusken fired his dual-nose cannon and rejoiced as the coherent energy blipped toward the T-4's tailgate and blistered the transport's paint.

Kyle checked his mirror, saw the closely packed bikers, and spoke from the side of his mouth.

"Take the controls, Weeg. I'll teach them some manners.

Wee Gee beeped by way of a response, activated the second set of controls, and wondered if he had the proper programming. A quick check revealed that the buttons, switches, and pedals arrayed before him weren't all that different from those on a combine, which was fortunate since Kyle had disappeared.

The turret gun sat in a lightly armored tub located behind the control cab. The agent climbed over the side, settled into the gunner's saddle, and flicked the power switch. An entire row of indicator lights flashed green.

Blaster bolts splashed on armor, flashed over Kyle's head, and flew wide as the lead Tusken fired their weapons.

Kyle found the safety, switched to "live fire," and peered through the sight. Though swerving back and forth in an attempt to ruin his aim, the bikers still formed a highly concentrated target. The firing studs were located to either end of the handlebar controls. The Rebel pressed with both thumbs, watched coherent light stutter into the tightly packed formation, and whooped when a bike exploded.

Debris flew in every direction and sliced off a biker's head, leaving the body intact. The torso was still in place, still gripping the control, when the two-wheeler smashed into a bridge support. The pieces were everywhere, narrowly missed the end of the formation, and threw up clouds of dirt.

The twenty-kilometer bridge led into Baron's Hed. Six lanes narrowed to four as Wee Gee guided the transport onto the span. He glanced into a side mirror, saw that the Tusken were gaining, and pushed with his power grasper. Nothing happened. The droid realized that the accelerator was already on the floor.

Rogg had survived. The knowledge made him happy. He raised his right hand, gave a signal, and veered to the right. Kyle tracked the movement with the handlebar, fired a three-bolt burst, and swore when another rider was snatched from his seat. The bike swerved, narrowly avoided another, and tumbled end over end.

If Kyle was disappointed that Rogg survived, it was nothing compared to what Bordo felt. He was number two and had been for three long years. Three years of "Yes, Rogg, whatever you say Rogg, and thank you, Rogg." It was enough to gag a Krayt dragon.

So Bordo led the second echelon over the left side of the transport, set his controls to auto, and dropped to the back.

He lost his balance, fell, and stood. A quick check was sufficient to make certain that the human was occupied by the need to repel additional boarders. Bordo staggered toward the opposite side of the transport. A single look confirmed that his cowardly leader had taken his own sweet time getting into position. Bordo smiled behind his

bandages, waited for Rogg to look in his direction, and shot him in the goggles.

The speeder bike wobbled, veered away, and soared over the canyon. The engine quit, and the bike fell like a rock. Confident that his actions had been lost in the confusion of battle, Bordo waved the band ahead, turned in the direction of the control cab, and made his way forward.

Wee Gee saw an unrecognizable blob up ahead, zoomed in on it, and knew what it was. A roadblock! A big roadblock, capable of stopping the T4 dead in its tracks. He called for Kyle, knew the human couldn't hear, and wondered what to do.

Jan brought the *Moldy Crow* down from five thousand meters, found the ribbon of highway, and followed it toward the bridge. It had been difficult to watch over Kyle without being spotted, but she had managed to do so. Now, with the transport fleeing toward town and the bikers in hot pursuit, there was no need for pretense. If even one TIE fighter arrived- and was allowed to attack- the battle would be over.

"*Crow* to Kyle, do you copy?"

Kyle had inserted the comm plug into his ear so long ago he had forgotten it was there. A Tusken had come aboard and was headed his way. The agent pulled his blaster. "Yeah, I copy. What took so long?"

"You told me to stay clear, remember?"

Kyle raised his weapon and watched the Tusken do likewise. "When did you start taking orders from me?"

"I don't," Jan said primly, "as you can tell from the fact that the *Crow* is hanging over your mostly empty head."

"Right," Kyle replied as he shot Bordo through the chest, "which brings us back to where we started. What took so long?"

Jan smiled and was about to reply when she noticed the roadblock. "They threw a barricade across the highway. Prepare for pickup."

Kyle saw the *Crow* start to descend and turned toward the cab. He threw himself forward. "Hey, Weeg! Set the controls

to auto! Jan will pick us up!"

The droid didn't know who Jan was. But he had no desire to wind up as scrap. He did as he was told, rose from the passenger position, and turned toward the rear. A blaster bolt scored the side of his processor housing. He gave a long, drawn-out beep.

Kyle fired. A Tusken fell backward over the tailgate, was hit by one of the speeder bikes, and tumbled down the highway.

Wind whipped through Kyle's hair, and heat wrapped his shoulders as the *Crow* descended. The Tuskens fired at the ship as a hatch opened, a ramp was extended, and Jan shouted in Kyle's ear. "Here comes the roadblock! Jump!"

The Rebel heard her and was about to relay the order when he was snatched into the air. The droid had seen the ramp, grabbed the human's utility belt, and fired his repulsorlift engine. They had passed through the hatch by the time the transport hit the barricade.

The impact and the explosion that followed sent an AT-ST off the bridge, killed a platoon of stormtroopers, and created a wall of fire. Most of the surviving Tuskens were going too fast to stop.

They screamed as their bikes raced into the conflagration and blew up.

A few, those blessed with quick reactions or positioned toward the rear of the pack, curved away.

Heavy, dark smoke boiled up into the sky, pointed a finger toward the ship named *Vengeance*, and was blown away.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Kyle squirmed forward, waited for Jan to join him, and looked down on Baron's Hed. It had been an attractive city once, back during his childhood, but things had changed since then. He brought the electrobinoculars up to his eyes, made a minor adjustment, and scanned the sprawl below.

A castlelike structure served as the natural focal point of the city. It was called Government House and stood at the very top of a hill called Baron's Knoll, the geological feature around which the town was built.

Though not as high as the hill on which the agents lay, the tower was tall enough to offer a tactical advantage to anyone who sought to defend it. It also forced those below to look up as if to a higher authority, a psychological trick that was anything but accidental. No less an entity than Jerec himself had supervised its construction during his brief tenure as Governor.

The city fell away from the stone-built house in a series of steps, with the wealthiest citizens living toward the top and the poor at the very bottom.

Walls that Kyle remembered as eye-catchingly white had been allowed to turn gray, almost black, and the gardens, traditionally red with pyro flowers at that time of year, were largely untended now, or home to the weapons emplacements, antenna farms, and other military equipment deployed to cope with Rebel attacks. Attacks that had increased since the day Morgan Katarn's head appeared on a spike.



The spaceport was located a half-klick to the east and showed signs of regular use. Repulsors flared as a freighter lifted off, paused as if to get its bearings, and departed toward the south.

"So," Jan said, allowing her glasses to fall, "What do you think?"

"I think it'll be tough," Kyle replied honestly. "The city is crawling with Imperial troops, bounty hunters, and mercenaries."

"Government House seems like the logical objective."

"Yeah, but how to get in? Knock on the door?"

"I could drop you on the roof."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Kyle replied. "You'd have to wait, and that would give them time to organize. Look at those weapons emplacements. They'd cut you to pieces."

Jan raised an eyebrow. "Me? Or the *Moldy Crow*?" She made it sound like a joke, but she knew it wasn't.

Kyle met her eyes and looked away. "You. The *Crow* can be replaced."

It was the closest the agent had come to declaring his feelings for her, and although Jan regretted the manner in which the comment had been elicited, she liked the response. The silence felt awkward. She broke it. "Be careful down there. Call, and I'll come running."

Kyle smiled and indicated the comm unit on his wrist. "Don't worry. I will."

Jan nodded. She wanted to say something more but wasn't sure how it would come out. "Okay – see you later."

"Yeah," Kyle replied, swallowing the lump in his throat. "Later."

The female agent backed away, leaving Kyle to contemplate the city below. The sun had dropped toward the west, and lights twinkled through the evening haze. The city looked inviting, especially in the twilight, but Kyle knew better. He sighed and worked his way down off the skyline. A trail led toward the bottom. Gravity pulled him down.

The room was large but lacked external windows and felt

dreary. A table had been placed at the center of the space and was bathed in light. 8t88 moved slightly, which caused the arm to do likewise. It was new, to him anyway, and had been removed from another 88 unit which he maintained for parts.

How that machine felt or would manage without one of its limbs was of no interest to the droid. The arm had been flown in earlier that day. Lacking the services of a qualified roboticist, the droid had installed the part himself.

The wiring harness had been connected as had the tubes that carried hydraulic fluid to that particular extremity. He would fine-tune the wrist relay, adjust the roto-actuators, and test it out. Once that was accomplished, he would deal with the issue of the room.

8t88 held out his left hand. "Tuning stylus." The droid maintained a large retinue of servants, all of which were biologicals. The fact that "naturals" had created him and that he had enslaved them pleased the machine. Metal rang on metal as a human placed a tool in 88's hand. The droid threw it across the room. The tuning stylus, idiot! "Here give me that."

The robot took the correct instrument, made the necessary adjustments, and was finished a short time later. "There," 8t88 said while making a fist, "that's better, much better. Summon the fool in charge."

8t88's henchmen, two humans and a Gamorrean, looked at each other, shrugged, and wrote off the request as one of the droid's numerous eccentricities. A human mined Rol, the same one who couldn't tell the difference between a tuning stylus and a testing probe, left the room.

The person he sought, a rather snooty specimen who bragged that he had served Jerec during that individual's stint as planetary governor and for every executive since, had assumed what could only be described as airs. He took his own sweet time answering his page, preceded Rol up the stairs, and swept into the droid's somewhat Spartan quarters.

The tiniest of smiles touched the majordomo's carefully

pursed lips as he entered the room and bowed to 8t88. "Greetings, your eminence. Can I be of service?"

The words dripped with condescension. They made even Rol uneasy.

"You can tell me about the history of this house," 8t88 replied smoothly.

"Why, certainly," the majordomo replied. "What would you like to know?"

"Let's start with this room," the droid said casually, waving toward his surroundings. "I notice it adjoins the ballroom. A rather unusual location for guest quarters. Tell me to what purpose this magnificent enclosure was originally dedicated, and why I was chosen to occupy it."

The majordomo swallowed nervously. The assignment had been a jest, his way of putting an uppity machine in its place while impressing the staff. The possibility that the droid could and would take him to task for it had never occurred to the increasingly nervous human. Tiny beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. His hands started to shake. Should he apologize or bluff it out? He chose the second, less humiliating alternative.

"This is a VIP suite, sire, chosen because of your stature and rank. And located in close proximity to your work."

8t88 wiggled his right index finger. It operated flawlessly, which pleased him. "Come a little closer, please. My amplifiers aren't what they used to be."

Rol exchanged looks with the Gamorrean. They knew that 8t88 could hear a pin drop from a hundred meters away.

Convinced that his story had been accepted, and eager to insinuate himself into the machine's good graces, the majordomo shuffled forward. He wore an elaborate, self-invented uniform. A robe dragged behind him. It was dirty where the edge touched the floor.

8t88 waited until the human was within range of his new right arm, reached out, and grabbed a fistful of robe. The majordomo's head snapped forward as the droid pulled him closer. "Look into my face. It's the last thing you will ever see."

The previously haughty servant seemed to come apart as he gazed into the machine's metal countenance. "Please! I'm sorry I gave offense. Tell me how to make amends!"

"Ah," 88 said judiciously, "if only you could. But the malfunction is hidden within your skull, a difficult place to make repairs. I don't know if you've seen any brains lately, but they're hard to sort out. A CPU makes more sense."

The human was beside himself by now. A puddle had collected at his feet, and the guards wrinkled their noses—except for the Gamorrean, that is, who didn't notice. "My brain?"

"Why, yes," the droid replied. "Assuming you have one .... You know, the organ that believes it's superior to machines, and enjoys making fun of them."

The majordomo tried to object, tried to explain as the metal-cold hand spanned his face but soon lost interest. It seemed that the pressure, plus the sound of cracking facial bones, had caused him to faint. Not before he screamed and sent birds fluttering out from the eaves.

If the security in and around Baron's Hed had been lacking before, it certainly wasn't now. Kyle's presence at the farm and subsequent escape had resulted in a heightened level of security.

Lines had formed in front of the city gates. Residents were eyescanned prior to admission, and nonresidents were subject to interrogation. It was not a process the agent wanted to endure, especially given his status as a renegade and the price on his head. No, there had to be a better way to gain access, or so he hoped.

An hour passed while Kyle lurked in a heavily shadowed doorway and watched the western gate. Disguises, ruses, and all manner of clever and not-so-clever stratagems were conceived, considered, and rejected, including a potentially suicidal plan that involved climbing the wall and shooting the guards.

There were so many plans, in fact, that he nearly failed to recognize the chance when it came.

The Imperials sent patrols out into the countryside on a regular basis, which meant that they returned at all hours of day and night. A pair of commandos on speeder bikes passed the doorway, followed by an armored hoverscout loaded with stormtroopers.

Kyle had been on similar patrols and knew how tiring they were. The troopers wanted to shuck their armor, take a shower, and find some beer. Their morale, like their state of readiness, was at its lowest ebb .... Perfect for someone as desperate as he was.

An AT-ST followed behind the hoverscout, and it- plus an unexpected diversion- provided the opportunity for which the Rebel had been waiting.

The diversion came courtesy of an unfortunate citizen who had the monumentally bad luck to drive his flock out into the arterial at the exact moment that the patrol happened past.

The speeder bikes sliced the herd in half, the gra ran in circles, and their owner tried to put things right. It wasn't easy, though, and the commandos didn't help when they kicked the goatlike animals, starting a panic.

What with the owner shouting, the gra bawling, and the Imperials swearing, Kyle had little difficulty slipping out of the doorway, dashing across a section of pavement, and jumping onto one of the AT-ST's podlike feet. Then, having plastered himself against the inside of the walker's leg, Kyle did his best to hang on, a seemingly simple task that turned out to be a good deal more difficult than he had predicted.

Riding the pod up off the heat-fused pavement was relatively simple. The hard part followed. The quarter-ton foot fell with alarming speed and struck the ground with so much force that Kyle nearly lost his grip. The impact made the agent's knees bend, sent a jolt up his spine, and rattled his teeth.

The whole thing was so bad that he barely noticed as the machine crushed a gra, minced through the remains of the herd, and turned toward a heavily guarded gate.

The agent held his breath as the sentry aimed a salute at

the AT-ST's commanding officer, looked up when he should've looked down, and missed seeing a suspicious pair of arms.

Kyle held on for dear life as the machine made its way through the warren of streets that comprised low town, the section of Baron's Hed where the poorest citizens lived and the majority of businesses were located.

The patrol turned a corner preparatory to heading for their barracks. The Rebel waited for a likely looking shadow, jumped just before the pod hit ground, and scurried for cover.

The agent hid in the shelter of a vine-draped wall, made sure that his departure had gone unnoticed, and straightened his clothes. The fact that they still bore traces of mud and grease would work in his favor. The idea was to fit in, and the citizens of low town weren't known for their sartorial splendor.

Kyle stepped out onto the street, adopted the air of someone who belonged there, and made for the center of town. The homes of high town were well lit, which gave definition to the hill on which they sat.

Government House, which blazed with lights, crowned the very top. Finding it would be easy. Getting in would be more difficult.

The side street gave way to Rimmer's Alley, a long, garishly lit thoroughfare that led to the base of the hill. Signs glowed, lights pulsed, and music blared beyond eternally open doors. The alleys stank of urine, vomit, and the incense used to cover up the smell.

Traffic, crust of which was pedestrian, increased, and so did the danger. Kyle allowed his hand to drift toward his weapon as a brace of stormtroopers appeared on the far side of the street, paused to question a street vendor, and continued on their way. The agent felt relieved but knew the most dangerous adversaries would be less obvious.

A spacer lurched out of a bar, staggered to the curb, and threw up.

A droid, its extremities twisted by accident or design,

begged for alms. A woman, her makeup glowing as if lit from within, smiled and winked. None posed a threat, but those hidden among them did. The Rodian bounty hunter, his eyes scanning for prey, the informer listening while he swept the street, and the Imperial agent made obvious by his boots. All were enemies.

Kyle walked the length of the street as quickly as he could without drawing undue attention to himself. It wasn't until he had left the main drag and entered the relative darkness of a residential area that the Rebel knew he'd been followed. He felt the other person's presence before he actually saw her with his eyes. The Force rippled away from the tail in the same manner that oil separates itself from water.

Kyle waited for the pool of light offered by one of the widely spaced streetlamps, paused as if looking for a landmark, and turned.

The tail made no attempt to mask her interest and nodded politely. The woman had been attractive once, but that was before her left eye had been destroyed and a bionic implant installed in its place. The device was equipped with a three-lens turret which whirled as it turned and delivered a tight shot to her hard-wired brain. Kyle noticed that the woman wore two blasters to his one. A sphere hovered over one shoulder, its purpose unclear.

Her voice was deep and husky. "You looking for something, citizen? Maybe I can help."

"Thanks," Kyle replied, "but no thanks. How 'bout you? Would you like some directions? Or do you plan to follow me all night?"

"That's an interesting weapon you have there," the woman replied easily. "Kinda rare isn't it?"

Kyle cursed his own stupidity. The lightsaber was not only rare but valuable and certain to attract attention. He should have concealed it. The woman might or might not have help. Kyle had no desire to find out; he'd have to deal with her, and quickly.

"Yeah, it is kinda rare, sort of like that sphere over your

shoulder .... Interested in a trade?"

Kyle moved his left hand toward the lightsaber and went for the blaster with his right. He pulled the weapon and fired it a tenth of a second before the would-be thief fired hers. Her bolt went wide his struck her throat. She made a gargling sound and collapsed in a heap.

Kyle shifted his attention to the sphere, saw an eight-centimeter-long spike emerge, and backed away. The ball hummed menacingly, wove back and forth, and bored inward.

The agent backpedaled again, tried to correct his aim, and tripped on the curb. He fell over backward, felt the blaster fly out of his hand, and heard it clatter on the pavement. He was about to roll in that direction, about to expose his back to the needle-sharp probe, when a voice entered his mind. He'd heard it before and knew it belonged to Rahn.

"Remember Nar Shaddaa? Go to the peace within."

Kyle remembered the landing platform, the manner in which time had slowed, and the ensuing battle. Achieving the necessary state was easier this time. The sphere slowed, and the hum became a lowpitched growl.

"Now," Rahn continued, "fight like a Jedi."

Kyle stood, thumbed a button, and heard the air crackle as the lightsaber came to life. Though slower now, the sphere continued its hypnotic motion.

"Good," Rahn said. "Now, close your eyes."

Kyle eyed the deadly looking sphere and shook his head. "I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Close your eyes, or I will leave. There are other students, some of whom show considerable promise." The criticism hurt, but the fact that Rahn regarded him as a student made Kyle feel good. He remembered the Academy's fencing instructor, a man who had expected unquestioning obedience from his students and never abused their trust. He closed his eyes.

"Now," Rahn continued, "feel the sphere, feel the way it moves, and merge with it."

Kyle tried to see himself the way the sphere would, as a



heat signature, moving, but in ways that his on-board computer could analyze and extrapolate from.

"Excellent," Rahn said encouragingly. "You know where the sphere will go next. Aim for that spot."

Kyle "knew" the sphere would move to the right, brought the lightsaber down through the spot where it would be, and knew he'd missed.

"You were close," Rahn said, "very close. Try again."

Kyle tried again. He visualized a grid this time, green, with white lines, and "saw" the sphere displayed on it. It moved left, right, and left again. He sensed where the target would go and acted accordingly. As the agent opened his eyes, it was to confirm what he already knew.

The sphere exploded, and a tiny fragment of hot plastic hit his cheek. Shrapnel flew, and time returned to normal. It felt as if an hour had passed, but a quick check of his chrono suggested otherwise.

The entire incident had lasted no more than three or four minutes.

The Rebel hit the thumb switch, stuck the lightsaber through his belt, and retrieved his blaster. Time was passing and there was reason to hurry.

Jerec couldn't see 8t88 in spite of the fact that the holographic projection was eight meters tall and more than eleven meters wide. He pretended that he could, though, knowing his actions would feed the carefully fashioned myths that surrounded him. Myths that overstated his considerable power by a factor of ten.

Still, he could imagine how 8t88 looked, along with the re-created mosaic and the holo-animated star map. Imagine, and glory in the knowledge that he was about to become the most powerful individual in the civilized worlds no, in the universe, a position for which he was eminently suited.

"Well done, 8t88. The Valley of the Jedi will soon be mine. Meet the cargo ship *Sulon Star* at the refueling station outside of Baron's Hed. Your payment awaits."

The droid bobbed his head in what could have been

interpreted as a nod or a bow, touched a button, and was gone.

Jerec turned his back to the holo tank and let the bridge crew gaze into long-dead eyes. Sariss was there. He could feel her presence. "We have what we came for... Sariss, prepare the *Vengeance* for hyperspace."

Sariss bowed. "Yes, my lord."

Orders were given, drives engaged, and the ship broke orbit.

Though not possessed of the emotional nuances that human beings claim to experience, 8t88 felt what he imagined to be an enormous sense of satisfaction.

In order to complete his assignment, the droid had created a threedimensional star map from the ceiling mosaic and beamed the digitized information up to the *Vengeance*. The original, which 8t88 continued to project toward the center of the room, floated before him. It was a thing of beauty. He took one last look before shutting the image down. The map had been delivered, payment was assured, and he could afford to gloat.

The majordomo's death had worked wonders on the household staff, who had a sudden and unprecedented respect for intelligent machines. The thronelike chair was a little over the top, perhaps, but the symbolism was appreciated, and 8t88 took pleasure in using it. His pet, a winged monstrosity with an underthrust jaw and heavily lidded eyes, growled and crouched to his right. Its short, stubby tail made a thumping sound as it struck the wooden floor.

A long, ornately carved table stretched toward the far end of the room. Chairs stood to either side, some pulled back to allow access, some pushed forward. The reassembled mosaic occupied most of the table's surface. The beast growled and sniffed the air.

The droid patted the monster's head. "What's thematter, my pet? Hungry again?"

The shadows stirred. Kyle Katarn stepped out into the

light. He held a blaster in his hand. The beast rose to its feet. Saliva dripped from its jaws, and a growl rumbled deep in its throat. 88 took a grip on the animal's harness. "Not yet, my pet. You can eat him later."

"I see you found a new arm," Kyle commented lightly. "I should have aimed for your head."

The droid stood. An electronic signal went out. "Rot! Hontho! Trox! Take him!"

The Rebel shook his head mockingly. "Sorry, old rust bucket, but Rol and his friends are permanently indisposed. I want the map."

The droid gestured toward the table. "So? Take the map. Go ahead, put it in your pockets."

"Thanks," Kyle said dryly, "but no thanks. The digital version will be a good deal more convenient."

A motor whined, a section of ceiling started to descend, and light leaked around it. Kyle shifted his aim to cover the platform as a pair of legs appeared. 88 backed away. His pet resisted and left claw marks on floor.

Yun smiled, dropped to the table, and thumbed his lightsaber. It popped to life. "You want the map? Here, I'll cut it to size."

The lightsaber rose and fell. Super-heated tiles exploded. Kyle adjusted his aim and felt a sledgehammer hit his chest. Not a real sledgehammer but one shaped from the Force, and just as effective. He backpedaled and slammed into a chair. The blaster tumbled away, and Yun shook his head.

"So, this is what the light side sends against us. No wonder we succeed."

So saying, lightsaber buzzing in his hand, he strode the length of the table. Broken tile skittered away from his bets. Kyle recognized the Jedi as one of the three he'd seen at the farm . . . the young one.

The Rebel raised his feet, kicked the table, and did a backward somersault. The chair crashed to the floor, and the agent landed on his knees.

8t88 dragged his still-unwilling pet into an alcove. A durasteel door slammed down in front of him.

Machinery whined as the turbolift carried him upward. Surprised by Kyle's move and more than a little intrigued, Yun moved forward. Kyle, who was still on his knees and at a disadvantage, pulled his lightsaber. Energy crackled and the smell of ozone filled the air as the Rebel managed to raise his weapon and block the Jedi's blow.

Yun frowned. It seemed that his opponent was more capable than the first impression would have suggested. The Jedi felt the tiniest trickle of fear enter his belly.

Kyle sensed the other man's hesitation, gained his feet, and allowed his opponent to disengage. In spite of the fact that his fencing lessons had made use of a fixed blade and his duel with the sphere had been somewhat brief, the combination gave the Rebel experience from which to draw. He concentrated on the Jedi's eyes, felt the Force flow around him, and lunged to the right.

Yun saw his adversary shift position, moved to intercept, and ducked as lethal energy swept through the space where his head had been. It was close. Too close for a novice.

Kyle struck again. Though slightly off, his blow sliced through the upper part of Yun's arm and drew blood, which was cauterized by the weapon's heat.

A cry escaped the Jedi's lips as the lightsaber fell from his hand, and he lost his balance and skidded on his back. Kyle approached, and Yun raised his arm. He was frightened, very frightened, but determined to maintain his pride. "So, kill me, Rebel, just as I would kill you!"

It seemed like good advice, and Kyle raised his weapon. But as he was about to strike, the other man's words echoed in his head. "Just as I would kill you." Was that the kind of man he wanted to be, one who would kill without reason?

8t88 had the map, and the Jedi had been neutralized. Kyle took three steps backward, lowered his weapon, and turned the device off.

Rahn, absent till now, reappeared. "Your father and I are proud of you, my son, for mercy is first and foremost among a Jedi's virtues."

Yun was amazed yet philosophical at the same time. There was something about the other Jedi's actions that felt right. But how could that be? Mercy was synonymous with weakness, He thought of Sariss, of how ashamed his mentor would be, and willed himself to be elsewhere. Yun floated toward the ceiling. His weapon followed.

Kyle watched for a moment, his eyes locked with Yun's, and realized his mistake. 8t88! The agent turned and raised his weapon. But the room was empty, or so it seemed until a blaster bolt sizzled past the agent's head.

"There he is! Kill him!"

Blaster bolts flashed out of the darkness and bounced away as Kyle used the lightsaber to deflect them. The action seemed natural. But it threw a scare into the stormtroopers. "Did you see that? He's a Jedi!"

There was a pause as some of the troopers tried to run and were stopped by a blaster-wielding noncom. It was necessary to kneecap one of them before the tide turned.

Kyle retrieved his blaster, backed his way into a stairwell, and brought the wrist comm to his mouth.

"Hey Jan, how 'bout a lift?"

Jan circled the house, waited for an Imperial shuttle to clear the roof pad, and came in for a landing.

"Ready and waiting, Kyle. Meet me on the roof."

"Glad to hear it," Kyle replied, spraying the ballroom with blaster fire. "I seem to have overstayed my welcome."

"You have that effect on people sometimes," Jan agreed. "I'm the exception."

Kyle pounded up the stairs, pushed the door open, and stepped into the night. Repulsors flared as the *Crow* settled onto the pad. The agent grinned. "Lucky for me."

"Yeah," Jan agreed, "lucky for you. Now, get aboard."

Kyle ran up the ramp, entered the ship's belly, and made his way to the control room- "Did you see someone leave?"

"Yeah, a shuttle took off just as I came in."

Kyle swore. "That was 88... The miserable pile of junk has the map! Don't let him escape!"

Jan knew she should have asked "What map?" but was

tired of the charade. "No, sir. Yes, sir."

The *Crow* lifted free of the roof, turned as an anti-aircraft battery opened up, and blasted toward the south. A stream of energy bolts cut across the bow. Jan took evasive action. Kyle was thrown to the deck.

He scrambled to his feet. "Thanks for the warning."

"Sorry. A slip of the hand, that's all. Better strap in."

Kyle did as he was told and watched Jan out of the corner of his eye. She was both wonderful and maddening at the same time. How did she manage that?

Lights appeared on the horizon, and Jan smiled.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Fuel City had been sited ten clicks south of the spaceport for reasons of safety. It included rows of storage tanks, which were connected by a maze of pipes and served nine elevated refueling stations.

Lights, which seemed to have been mounted helter-skelter throughout the complex, threw a thousand mysterious shadows.

The *Sulon Star* hovered by station six and was held in place by a network of interlocking tractor beams. Fuel entered the ship via hoses large enough to crawl through.

8t88 guided the shuttle in under the cargo vessel's belly and waited while computers communicated with each other. A hatch opened, and the shuttle rose inside a cone of greenish-blue light. The bay was intentionally small to maximize the vessel's cargo capacity. There were slots for four small craft, three of which were taken, two by lifeboats and one by an Imperial shuttle.

8t88 registered a sense of satisfaction as he engaged the ship's autopilot and left the cockpit. The shuttle belonged to the *Vengeance*. Jerec was efficient, a rare quality where biologicals were concerned, and one worth celebrating.

The beast licked himself, heard a noise, and turned in that direction. His tail thumped inquiringly. 88 nodded. "Yes, my pet, you can come."

The beast purred and stretched his wings while 88 released its harness. The machine would have preferred to leave the animal behind, but with no bodyguards to protect

his back, the beast was better than nothing.

They left the shuttle, made their way to a hatch, and waited for it to open. There was no one to greet them. An insult the droid wouldn't forget, and still another manifestation of antimachine bias.

Footsteps echoed off bulkheads, and claws clicked on metal as the twosome made their way through empty corridors and entered the ship's wardroom. Light gleamed off the surface of a scratched metal table, shadows clung to recesses set into the bulkheads, and there were no signs of life.

The droid's hip squeaked as he turned. "Hello? Anyone here?"

Something stirred. One, no, two figures separated themselves from the darkness and stepped out into the light. 8t88 felt the same sense of notrightness that humans refer to when they have a "bad feeling" about something. Gorc? Pic? Why would Jerec dispatch Jedi on what amounted to a routine errand? Or had someone decided to afford him the respect he was due? Yes, the droid decided, that would explain it.

He spoke with the authority natural to a superior being. "I'm here to collect my pay."

The "twins" smiled, but the expressions were empty of humor. It was Pic who spoke. "Good, because we're here to deliver it."

Jan was still apologizing to Fuel City air control, still making excuses, as the *Crow* departed. "Sorry about that, Control. I got confused, that's all. Over."

Captain Zyak was well aware of how confused civilian pilots could be. He shook his head in disgust. He wore a pencil-thin mustache and a standard-issue sneer. "Copy, one-niner-two. Just get that pile of junk off my screen. And be more careful in the future."

Jan grinned. "Roger that, Control."

Zyak liked the sound of her voice and decided to offer some advice. "Watch your vector, one-niner-two, there was



trouble in Baron's Hed, and it would be real easy for one of those missile batteries to make a mistake. Over."

Jan struggled to sound concerned. "Trouble- Yes, sir- thanks for the tip. Over."

Zyak walked to the window and watched the running lights lose themselves among the galaxy of floods. He wondered what the pilot looked like and knew he would never get to find out. Life, if that's what this tour of duty could be called, was anything but fair.

Kyle watched the *Crow* depart, waited long enough to ensure that Jan was okay, and turned to the task at hand. Tracking 8t88 was much more difficult by the fact that machines didn't seem to disturb the Force the way living beings did.

Thanks to the fact that only three of the nine refueling stations were occupied, however, the agent was able to narrow his choices. One vessel was too small, and one was fully automated, which left a cargo vessel named the *Sulon Star*. The Rebel chose what appeared to be the correct catwalk. It was empty and rang to his footsteps.

As with most vessels of her type, the *Sulon Star* was equipped with an emergency-access hatch located on the topmost surface of her hull. The catwalk passed approximately ten meters above it. Kyle paused, checked the surrounding area, and swung his legs over the railing. The jump seemed do-able, in spite of the hull's curvature.

Having checked his weapons to make sure they were secure, the agent stepped out into midair and fell like a rock. He absorbed most of the impact with bent knees, checked to make sure the jump was unobserved, and made his way to the hatch.

The top hatch, like the rest of the ship's locks, was open in compliance with the station's safety regs. The open ports would allow autohoses to enter in case of fire while the crew escaped.

Kyle had concocted a story to explain his presence should he run into a crew member. But he wasn't called upon to

use it. The agent lowered himself through the lock and dropped into the corridor all without challenge.

Was the ship deserted? It seemed that way until Kyle felt the Force ripple away from something and knew others were about. 8t88? No, but the feeling was reminiscent of the droid's loathsome pet. And if the pet was present...

Cautious now, and having no desire to go head-to-head with the winged beast, Kyle pulled his blaster.

The corridor curved right, and he curved with it. He could feel the creature. And something less defined, as if it were somehow screened.

The agent rounded a corner, saw light spill out through a hatch, and paralleled the bulkhead. He paused next to the opening, listened for movement, and heard air whisper through the overhead ducting.

It was strange, very strange, and Kyle didn't like it.

The Rebel narrowed his eyes, rewrapped his fingers around his blaster, and made his move. He slipped through the hatch, put a layer of durasteel behind his back, and scanned the compartment.

He saw 88 and heard the growl at the same moment. The droid was seated in a chair with his back to the door, and the monster squatted beyond. Its eyes were red and made tunnels through the darkness. Kyle half expected the beast to attack, but it remained where it was.

Somewhat reassured but ready to fire if the need arose, the Rebel moved forward. "I've been waiting for this moment."

"And so have I," a voice said.

A number of things happened at once. 8t88's head toppled from his shoulders, bounced off his lap, and rolled across the deck. The monster pounced, swallowed the tidbit whole, and looked surprised.

Kyle heard the voice and turned toward the sound. A mental shield dropped, and the shadows produced something huge. It wore a helmet, chin guard, and chest armor... But of even more importance was the enormous lightsaber that the Dark Jedi clutched in a three-fingered

hand. The air crackled as the monstrous weapon scythed through the air.

Kyle frowned, wondered how a Jedi could be so stupid, and shot Gore in the face. The giant swayed and toppled backward. He landed with a thud. His lightsaber pinwheeled through the air, hit handle-down, and turned itself off.

Kyle was still thinking about what had occurred when a banshee dropped onto his back and sank razor-sharp talons into his flesh. "You killed Gorc! Now you will pay!"

Kyle attempted to shake the assailant off, felt a blade nick the side of his throat, and released the blaster. Fingers sought the agent's eyes as he reached up and back. He found a bone-thin arm and wrestled with it as he backpedaled across the room. The agent hit the bulkhead as hard as he could.

There was a crunching sound.

Pic uttered a high-pitched scream, directed a blast of energy at Kyle's mind, and fell to the deck.

Stunned by the attack and bleeding from a half-dozen puncture wounds, Kyle staggered away.

Aroused by the scent of blood and eager to make an easy kill, the beast launched its attack. The monster's claws made a scratching noise as they sought traction on the deck. A roar emanated from deep within its throat as it charged.

Though slowed by the pain in his head, Kyle still managed to pull the lightsaber from his belt and turn. The weapon blurred through the air, took the monster in the mouth, and cut off the top of its head.

Kyle was unaware that the animal was dead. Its legs continued to pump until the monster hit an equipment locker and collapsed. Metal buckled, doors popped open, and spare parts spilled onto the deck.

Dazed, and glad to be alive, Kyle killed the lightsaber and fell into a chair. The once-immaculate room had been transformed into a charnel house. The sight of it, not to mention the smell of it, made him nauseous.

Slowly, so as to minimize the pain, the agent rose to his

feet. He stood over the monster and pondered what to do. The creature lay facedown, or would have, had its face survived.

The Rebel grabbed hold of a quickly stiffening leg, levered the monster over, and re-lit the lightsaber.

The smell of burnt hair filled Kyle's nostrils as he made a long, only slightly wavy incision.

The agent gagged as coils of blue-green intestine boiled out of the monster's abdominal cavity and squirmed over the deck. There were three stomachs to choose from. But only one looked twice its normal size.

Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Kyle sliced the organ open, spotted 88's head, and reached in to get it.

The agent's fingers slid through a coating of green bile, found the droid's scanner sockets, and used them to secure purchase. Kyle pulled the casing free and fought a series of dry heaves.

Having wiped the head dry with linen taken from a locker, the agent was about to depart when a high-pitched scream caused him to turn.

Pic had regained consciousness. The Jedi was little more than a blur. He had covered half the distance between them and was airborne by the time the Rebel started to react. There was no time to think. Instinct took over.

The head weighed a good ten kilos and was made of metal. It described an arc around Kyle's body and struck with considerable force. There was a loud cracking noise as skull hit skull, and Pic, who resembled nothing so much as a rag doll, flew across the compartment, smashed into a bulkhead, and fell to the deck.

Paranoid by now, the Rebel recovered his blaster, checked each body for a sign of life, and left the compartment: The safest, most expedient thing to do was to return the way he had come.

Kyle turned to the left, heard someone shout, and sensed rather than saw the energy bolt that flashed past his head. The agent yelled into his wrist comm and ducked around a corner. He had what he'd come for. But could he escape?



The 3-D print had been rolled into a cylinder and secured with a piece of wire. Jan had come across the item while searching for her multi-tool and had opened it up. A woman stared out at her, a woman so pretty that Jan felt momentarily jealous until she recognized Kyle's eyes and knew where they had come from. Here was a woman who had loved him, too, albeit in a different way.

The sound of his voice made her jump. "Hey Jan. I got what I came for, but these clowns want it back. How 'bout a ride? Over."

Jan took her boots off the console and spoke into her headset. "Hang in there. I'm on my way. Over."

All the major systems were on-line. Jan flipped some switches, waited for the corresponding green lights, and fired the ship's repulsors. The *Crow* went straight up.

Jan turned the bow toward Fuel City and added power. The lighthearted banter didn't fool her for a moment. Kyle was in trouble. Seconds would count. She was low this time, so low, that Fuel City Control wouldn't see her till it was too late. A flock of gra scattered as she skimmed a hilltop, and lights twinkled on the horizon.

It seemed as if someone had called for help because the ship was crawling with troops. Kyle shot an officer, hurtled down the passageway, and saw the access ladder.

Armored legs appeared, followed by a stormtrooper's torso. His boots hit the deck; he turned, saw Kyle, and went for his assault weapon. It was slung across his back and not readily accessible. The agent shot the Imperial three times in quick succession and watched him fall.

An indicator flashed red and signaled the need for a fresh power pack. There were backups on the agent's belt but no time to mess with them, not with a perfectly good assault rifle waiting to be taken. He holstered the blaster, grabbed the more powerful weapon, and spun toward the other end of the passageway.

A trio of Commandos came around the corner, paused by

their officer's body, and opened fire.

Kyle ducked, fired three short bursts, and brought two of them down. The third thought better of the whole thing and fled.

Kyle took advantage of the respite to scramble up the ladder and slam the inner hatch. Two minutes' worth of sustained fire was sufficient to spotweld the door in place.

Once that was accomplished, the Rebel climbed through the lock and stuck his head outside. There was no sign of Jan. But there was lots of opposition. Ten or twelve Imperials were visible on the catwalks around him. A trooper spotted him, yelled something incoherent, and opened fire.

Thankful for the protection offered by the lock, Kyle returned the favor. The Imperial threw out his arms and fell into the darkness below. Orders were shouted, and fire came from all around.

Captain Zyak had completed his shift and was about to head for his quarters when all heck broke loose. Information was hard to come by but judging from fragmentary comm traffic and the manner in which energy beams zipped back and forth, a full-fledged firefight was under way.

Given the fact that his replacement, a sallow-faced specimen named Nomo, had just graduated from air-traffic control school, the officer decided to stay. He peered through electrobinoculars and spoke from the side of his mouth.

"Lieutenant Nomo. Get ahold of the idiot in charge of those troops and remind him that they named this complex 'Fuel City' for a reason. One shot in the wrong place and every single one of us is dead."

Nomo's hand shook as he lifted a comlink and made the necessary call.

"Incoming ship," a tech said laconically. "Vector eight- and coming fast."

"Tell them to break it off," Zyak ordered, scanning the

battle below. "I have enough problems."

"I spoke with their commanding officer," Nomo said. "He has orders to kill the infiltrators regardless of cost."

"His butt will be the first to fry," the officer said wearily, "but there's no reasoning with people like that. Call operations. Tell them to stop the pumps and bleed the pipes. Order switching to close valves one through forty-six. The less fuel in circulation, the better."

"The incoming craft suggests that we perform an unnatural act on ourselves," the tech said patiently.

"Response?"

Zyak turned, strode over to the tech's position, and scanned his screens. He'd seen the target before. One-niner-two was back and there was very little doubt as to why. The pilot with the nice voice had dropped a team of agents into his complex and was planning to extract them. Zyak remembered the advice he had given and felt betrayed. It was stupid. He knew that, but that's how he felt.

"Blow it out of the sky," Zyak said flatly, "Do it now."

Jan kicked the *Crow* from port to starboard in an effort to confuse the surface-to-air missile batteries. She heard a tone as the weapons were launched. The ship's computer found the missiles, classified them by type, and fed the information to her console.

Jan ejected chaff in an effort to create more targets, fired four antimissile missiles, and used her energy cannon to strafe an outlying fuel tank. It exploded, attracted every heat-seeking missile then in the air, and erupted again. An obscene red-orange flower blossomed, consuming everything around it, and sent petals toward the sky.

"By all the gods," Nomo said, his voice filled with wonder, "look at that! We blew the ship out of the air!"

"That was storage tank sixteen, you idiot," Zyak replied crossly. "Have they bled the pipes yet?"

Nomo checked a console. "Not entirely, sir. They read seventy percent and falling."

"And the valves?"

"They're working on it. Some kind of relay went down. What's so important about bleeding the . . . "

Nomo's question was cut short as tanks fifteen, fourteen, and thirteen blew in quick succession. The explosions shook the transparisteel windows and sent a mug crashing to the deck. Fires, each overlapping the next, lit the night.

"That's why the pipes are so important," Zyak said bleakly. "As long as they have fuel in them and the valves remain open, they function as fuses. Well, Nomo, it's your shift. Sort this one out and you'll be a Captain by Monday. Fail, and you'll be working in the mines."

The color drained from the younger officer's face as he watched Zyak remove personal items from a drawer. "Mines? What mines? Where will you go?"

"As far as I can," Zyak said grimly. "As far as I can."

The *Crow* banked left, then right as Jan guided the ship between pillars of fire. The control tower appeared on the left, and she passed within fifty meters of it. A frightened face peered out and disappeared.

"Kyle? Where the heck are you? We won't get a second chance. Over."

Kyle watched another storage tank explode off to the north, realized the destruction was marching his way, and spoke into his wrist comm. "Look for station six. I'm on the top surface of a large cargo ship. Over."

Fuel City's computerized docking system was still up and running. A diagram appeared on the *Crow's* nav screen. Jan spotted station six, dodged a communications pylon, and fired her retros. The ship slowed, dropped into the appropriate approach slot, and eased forward. Blaster fire splashed against the ship's hull but lacked the force to penetrate. The larger, more powerful weapons, the ones assigned to defend the entire complex, were equipped with stops that prevented them from firing on a fueling station, a rather wise precaution, all things considered.

The *Crow* was backlit by a distant fire. Kyle raised his



arms and brought his wrists together as the ship coasted into position. The ramp whirred, and jerked to a stop. A gust of wind hit the starboard side of the hull, and Jan fought for control.

The agent checked to make sure that he had a good grip on 88's head, waited for the ramp to swing his way, and made the necessary jump. The ramp bounced, swayed, and pulled Kyle up. Energy bolts flashed, but none came close enough to worry about.

Once inside, Kyle made his way to the cockpit. Jan wrinkled her nose. "Who's your friend? He could use some deodorant."

Kyle grinned. "Jan, meet 8188. What's left of him, anyway. 8t88, meet Jan. She's cranky sometimes. But very good looking. Not something you could relate to."

It was a nice compliment, and one that Jan would have enjoyed a lot more if the circumstances had been different. Sensors went off as a TIE fighter approached. She performed a wing-over, circled a stillintact storage unit, and opened fire. The enemy ship seemed to stagger, nose-dived into the tank, and triggered a massive explosion. Shrapnel flew in every direction, punctured a line, and sent fuel spilling out onto the ground. A piece of still-burning debris splashed into the liquid and set it afire. The lake expanded and wrapped the maintenance facility in a red- hot embrace.

Kyle swallowed and fought the desire to grab the controls. "Where the heck did he come from?"

"I believe TIE fighters are manufactured by Sienar Fleet Systems," Jan replied sweetly, "or were you referring to the pilot?"

"Ex-pilot," Kyle said dryly. "Head for the Nefra Canyons. Maybe we can lose them."

Though not as familiar with Sulon as Kyle, Jan knew the canyons were part of the dry, semiarid region that lay just beyond the Hanto mountain range, only minutes away as the crow flies. The sun had broken over the eastern horizon by then and flooded the land with pink light.

Jan turned toward the east, saw Kyle rise from his chair, and knew what he intended to do. The *Crow* was vulnerable from behind.

Mountains appeared ahead. A brace of TIE fighters took up position behind them and opened fire.

Jan jinked back and forth. The cannon fire went wide. A pair of jagged peaks stabbed the sky. They were so close together that locals referred to them as "the twins."

Jan spoke into a wire-thin boom mike. "Grab something solid and hang tight."

The *Crow* stood on her right wing as she passed between the peaks. Kyle, who had opened the top hatch and was facing backward, had a bird's-eye view of what happened next.

The first TIE fighter imitated Jan's move and made it through the gap. The second wasn't so fortunate. It was hard to tell what went wrong, whether the pilot misjudged the distances involved or experienced a momentary malfunction. Whatever the reason, the Imperial ship caught the side of a peak, exploded, and sent an avalanche thundering toward the base of the mountain.

The surviving pilot hung back for a moment, seemed to regain his confidence, and took up the chase. Kyle fought the backward pressure exerted by the slipstream and drew his blaster. It contained a fresh power pack, and the indicator glowed green. The agent struggled to hold the weapon steady, pressed the firing stud, and watched energy blip toward the fighter. It was really kind of silly, like hunting a krayt dragon with a peashooter, but something was better than nothing. The Imperial ignored Kyle and opened fire. The bolts went wide.

Jan eyed the labyrinth of canyons, wished she knew them better, and put the ship into a long, shallow dive.

Reddish-brown walls rose around the *Crow* as the agent dived into one of the larger ravines, followed it to the right, and passed beneath a land bridge.

Kyle watched heavily eroded cliffs flash by hoped Jan knew what she was doing, and forced himself to let it go.

The Rebel felt a tremendous sense of calm as everything seemed to slow. Now he had time to think, to concentrate. He fired, rode the burst of energy outward, and flew wide of the target.

The agent corrected his aim, "saw" where the TIE fighter would go next, and triggered the next shot.

He rode this one all the way to the transparisteel canopy that protected the Imperial pilot and felt himself dissipate against it. Though not strong enough to punch its way through, the energy bolt did manage to blister the outer surface of the windshield.

The pilot leaned over sideways in an attempt to see around the blockage, lost his concentration, and paid for the mistake with his life.

Jan saw a cliff hurtling toward her face, pulled back on the control yoke, and felt something heavy hit the bottom of her stomach.

The *Crow* stood on her tail, Kyle struggled to hang on, and the TIE fighter kept going. It hit the wall, exploded, and showered the canyon with debris.

Jan leveled out, checked her sensors, and spoke into the mike. "Kyle? Are you okay?"

The voice came from right beside her as Kyle dropped into the copilot's seat. "No, I'm not okay. You took five years off my life."

Jan smiled. "And why not? I've saved it enough times. Where to?"

"The farm, so 88 can tell us what he knows."

"Does that make sense? Your father's place was crawling with Imperials."

Kyle nodded. "Yeah, but I'm guessing they're gone by now, pulled off to deal with the problems in Baron's Hed and Fuel City."

Jan looked toward the south. A column of smoke marked the spot where the refueling complex was located. And, judging from the way it billowed upward, the fires continued to burn. "You could be right. But how 'bout some sleep? Say, eight hours' worth?"

Kyle gave it some thought. A rest would feel good and would give the Imperials that much more time to clear the farm. "Copy that . . . Sleep first, farm second."

The sun hung low in the sky, shadows pointed toward the east, and the day was coming to an end. Jan circled the farm for the third time, searched the ground for signs of Imperial troops, and failed to see any.

"Looks like you were right, Kyle. I'll put her down."

The agent nodded. Jan had hidden the *Crow* in the ruins of a longdefunct factory, where a section of partially intact roof screened the vessel from orbital scrutiny. Snug in their hiding place and with Wee Gee to serve as a lookout, they slept through most of the day.

They awoke well past noon and took turns in the fresher. Jan tended to Kyle's cuts, scratches, and puncture wounds, and he made dinner. They ate outside, sitting within the ruins of a once-prosperous factory, talking about simple things, things that had nothing to do with war, fear, and death. It felt good and left both of them reenergized.

There was a gentle thump as the ship touched down. They left the vessel with blasters in hand. There were tracks but no sign of the troops who had made them. Kyle returned the blaster to its holster, called Wee Gee, and led the way to the house.

Hinges squeaked as the door swung open. Kyle checked for booby traps, failed to find any, and stepped inside. Things were just as he'd left them. Jan had never been in the house before and tried to imagine what it had been like- the man with the beard going about his work while a little boy took things apart and put them back together again- not unlike the many happy hours she had spent with her father.

Kyle's voice brought her back to the present. "Jan? What are you smiling about?"

Caught unawares, and more than a little embarrassed, Jan shrugged. "Nothing special. So where's this workshop I've heard so much about?"

"Right this way," Kyle replied. "Watch your step, though.

Our guests forgot to clean up after themselves."

The lights came on, and after a little bit of searching, Kyle found the items he required. It took the better part of ten minutes to locate the necessary cables, make the proper connections, and hook the droids together.

"There," Jan said, "that should do it. What now?"

"Now, we learn something very important," Kyle said gravely. "Something my father and at least one Jedi gave their lives to protect, the coordinates for a long-lost world and the Valley of the Jedi."

The way that he said it sent a tingle down Jan's spine. Wee Gee held the droid's head aloft and sent the necessary signal. Beams of light shot out of 88's eyes, and a series of seemingly random images appeared, followed by the one Kyle had been waiting for: a shot of the reconstructed ceiling mosaic, followed by layer after layer of star maps and a shot of an orange-green world.

Kyle gave a whoop of joy, and grabbed Jan and danced her around the room. She laughed and tripped on a pile of debris.

Kyle saved her from a fall, held her in his arms, and looked into her eyes. He liked what he saw there, and what he felt as their lips touched.

Finally, after what seemed like a long time but actually was not, the kiss came to an end. Kyle felt awkward and slightly embarrassed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to take advantage."

Jan shook her head. "Don't be. I'm not."

Repulsors rumbled, the walls shook, and Kyle went for his blaster. An extremely strong personality had arrived. One that sent waves through the Force and seemed to radiate strength. "The Imperials! They're back! Disconnect the head. Come on, Weeg let's get out of here."

The agent dashed out of the workshop and entered the living room. With a quick glance through the window, he skidded to a halt. A ship had landed, all right. But not the kind he had expected. The Rebel X-wing sat more than a hundred meters away. Its pilot, a man not that much older

than Kyle himself, stood before the tap tree.

Something about the man's stance, the way in which he paused to pay his respects to another life form, was more eloquent than words. That plus the lightsaber that hung by his side signaled who and what he was: a Jedi Knight.

Jan spoke from beside him. "That's Luke Skywalker. I met him aboard the *New Hope*."

Kyle frowned. "Skywalker? Here? Why?"

"I think he was sent to check on us," Jan said gently, "to see how we're doing."

Suddenly, Kyle was bedridden again, watching through half-slit eyes as Jan placed something in one of his pockets.

"You took the disk and gave it to them! They sent you to spy on me!" His voice was filled with anger, and Jan hardened herself against it.

"Yes, I did." The agent's chin came up, and her eyes glowed with defiance. "And I'd do it again. I love you, Kyle Katarn. But I love freedom even more .... The Valley of the Jedi is too important, too dangerous, for you to handle alone."

Kyle shook his head. "And to think that I trusted you."

Now it was Jan's turn to be angry. "Did you? Is that why you kept everything to yourself- asked me to risk my life for something I didn't know about? Treated me like a convenience? Ignored the chain of command? Acted as if you were smarter than everyone else?"

They were harsh words made all the worse by the fact that Kyle knew they were true. One part of him wanted to strike back, to hurt Jan in the same way that she had hurt him, but another, wiser aspect of his personality offered counsel. Which was more important? His pride? Or the relationship his words could destroy?

Silence hung like a blanket between them. Jan waited. What would Kyle say? What would he do? Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he took her hands in his. "I'm sorry, Jan. It won't happen again."

Jan kissed Kyle on the cheek, took him by the hand, and led him outside.

Skywalker, who seemed to have been waiting for such a

move, turned in their direction. He smiled and held out his hand. "Kyle Katarn, Luke Skywalker. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Kyle blushed at the unexpected compliment. "Thanks. The pleasure is mutual."

Skywalker gestured toward the lightsaber thrust through Kyle's belt. "That comes with a price, you know."

Kyle shrugged. "Everything does."

"You found the coordinates?"

Kyle nodded. "Yes, but Jerec got to them first."

The other Jedi looked thoughtful. "You plan to go there?"

Kyle looked at Jan, saw her nod, and looked back. "Somebody has to."

Skywalker was silent for a moment, as if listening to someone they couldn't see or hear. The words he spoke raised goose bumps on Kyle Katarn's arms. "Yes, for it is written that 'a Knight shall come, a battle will be fought, and the prisoners go free.'"

Jan was the first to break the ensuing silence. "Those words, where did they come from?"

Skywalker smiled. "I'm not sure. But I heard them from a Jedi who never was, a soldier who gave his life for freedom, and a father who believed in his son .... A man named Morgan Katarn."

The tap tree didn't notice when the Rebels left. True to its nature, it danced with the wind, took communion from the stars, and pulled sustenance through its roots. For the tap tree, like all its kind, knew the sun would return.





## Book III

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# *Jedi Knight*

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The airspeeder, a world-weary affair built from salvage and held together by incessant prayer, coughed, sputtered, and lurched through the air. It had been yellow once, but that was long ago, and large islands of rust dotted the sun-bleached paint. An outcropping of rock rose ahead.

The machine's sole occupant had a two-day growth of beard and eyes that peered from skin- draped caves. He saw the danger, swore, and fiddled with the controls. The repulsorlift engine cut out, caught, and pushed the machine higher. The top-most spire passed within a meter of the speeder's belly. The vehicle sagged as if exhausted by the effort, and Grif Grawley patted the console. "Thata girl . . . you done good . . . real good."

The settler peered over the side, saw the airspeeder's shadow flit across the land, and watched his gra bounce along the flats below. He knew where they were headed. The wind-sculpted hill, one of many left to mark the retreat of an ancient glacier, had triggered one of their preprogrammed instincts:

"Look for the high ground when the light starts to fade and watch for predators."

A survival strategy that seemed natural, but was actually the result of extensive genetic engineering. Genetic engineering that had proven so reliable that gra sperm and ova were normally sold "by the herd" and came with an electronic manual. A manual that Grif had memorized during the long trip to Ruusan.

A pile of boulders appeared in their path, and the herd split into two groups, one that followed Alpha, the dominant male, and one that trailed Beta, his mate.

The hill was closer now, and Grif dumped speed. The speeder was fragile, very fragile, and the settler didn't fancy a fifty-kilometer walk to Fort Nowhere, the only human outpost on Ruusan.

The speeder slowed, hovered over the summit, and settled onto skid marks left from previous landings. Grif cut power, ran the check list, and secured the tie-downs. The wind came up at night —

and it paid to be careful.

Then, with the surety of someone who has done something a hundred times, Grif set up camp. The shelter opened and locked with authoritative "snap." The combination cook chest and food locker extended its legs and stood beside the tent.

That's when Grif opened a much-abused metal case. Components, each hand crafted from whatever Grif could beg, borrow, or steal lay snuggled within.

He removed the assemblies one by one, held them up to the quickly fading light, and blew imaginary grit from their workings. Each unit made a satisfying "click" as it mated with the next. The object, which Grif called "Fido," was shaped like a boomerang and equipped with an assortment of sensors. The miniature flyer was designed to stay aloft all night, watch for signs of danger, and alert Grif should any appear. The machine beeped as it came to life and shivered while its gyro spun up.

The settler checked the machine's readouts, assured himself that all systems were green, and threw the device off a nearby cliff. Fido propelled itself into a thermal, switched its power plant to standby and soared into the quickly darkening sky.

Grif checked a monitor, verified the quality of the incoming holos, and returned to his chores. The gra were halfway up the hill by then, picking their way through the scree, and nibbling on tough, rubbery plants. A series of

cliffs would hold them at that level until morning came.

Half an hour later, with a tumbler of what the locals referred to as "Old Trusty" to keep him company and a fabulous view of the setting sun, Grif called his wife.

Carole Grawley was expecting the call and smiled as she lifted the handset. "Grif?"

"Hi, honey ... I'm sitting on top of hill 461 ... and everything's fine."

Carole carried the comet set out onto the flat piece of hard-packed dirt they jokingly called "the veranda." The house, which had been dug into a hillside twenty clicks south of Fort Nowhere, faced south to take advantage of the winter sun. Hill 461 was southwest of her position, and Carole looked in that direction. "How's the sunset? It looks marvelous from here."

Grif pictured his wife's face, still beautiful in spite of the heavily ridged scar tissue, and smiled. "It's gorgeous, honey ... just like you."

Carole Grawley smiled, knew he meant it, and changed the subject. "The pump's acting up again. I have drinking water, and enough for the garden, but the irrigation system is dry. The crops have started to droop."

Grif thought about the fact that the cave farmers had all the water they could use and wondered if they were right. "Outcropping," which was the name they used to describe what he and his wife did, was much more difficult than it had been on Sulon. Of course, working down in a cave, using light piped in from the surface, had its drawbacks, too. Like being closed in.

Grif took a pull from his drink. "No problem, honey. I'll fix ol' Jenny soon as I get back."

Carole Grawley smiled at her husband's propensity for naming machinery and watched the sun disappear beyond the western horizon. "I know you will, Grif. Take care of yourself out there."

"You can count on it," Grif replied. "Be sure to set the perimeter alarms. I'll call tomorrow."

"Love you ... "

"Love you, too. Good night."

With no sun to warm it, the air cooled quickly. Grif was able to see his breath by the time dinner was over and the first of Ruusan's three satellites popped over the Eastern horizon. The smugglers who built Fort Nowhere referred to the moons as "the triplets" and swore there were ruins on one of them. Not that it made much difference to Grif. He had other things to worry about.

The settler tossed back his drink, poured himself another, and checked Fido's scanner readings. The flyer, which circled the hill at regular five-minute intervals, assured him that everything was under control.

All 136 of the gra were accounted for, no predators had infiltrated the area, and atmospheric conditions were normal.

In fact, the only anomaly, assuming it qualified as such, was that the planet's network of sixteen combination weather and surveillance satellites had gone off the air. Not unheard of, but unusual, especially in light of the fact that the smugglers who had placed the machines in orbit were fanatical about maintenance. Still, things can and do go wrong, and Grif assumed that the problem would be identified and subsequently fixed.

The third moon had risen by that time and, with help from its siblings, threw a soft white cloak across the land. Grif finished the second drink, considered a third, and knew Carole would disapprove.

That being the case, he removed the electro-binoculars from their place in the skimmer and walked to the highest point on the hill. There was very little chance that he would spot the elusive natives, bouncing and floating across the land, but he never stopped trying. What some of his fellow settlers regarded with fear and loathing, he considered beautiful and fascinating.

Grif switched the electrobinoculars to infrared, chose a spot on the southern horizon, and quartered the area.

Rocks, still warm from the sun, glowed green in the viewfinder. Light streaked across the screen as a bush

runner dashed from one location to another. He moved the glasses farther to the right and that's when he saw the bouncer's telltale shape. It was round, like a ball. The settler felt his pulse pound as he pressed the zoom control. The image grew larger.

But wait, something was wrong, very wrong. The heat signature was too large, too intense, and too high in the air.

Grif knew how much the indigs loved to roll in front of the wind, bounce into the air, and float until gravity pulled them down. They got fifty or sixty meters' worth of altitude off a good bounce sometimes, but this object was a good deal higher than that.

So what could it be? Whatever it was had the capacity to hover —and move against the prevailing wind. Grif watched the glowing, green globe grow larger, realized it was coming his way, and felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. Since he could see it . . . it could see him!

Memories flickered through his mind, memories of an Imperial probe droid that drifted through the mist, memories of energy beams that stabbed the walls of his home, and the knowledge that he had no way to stop them.

He remembered the explosion, the flames, and the sound of Katie's screams. He remembered how Carole had tried to enter the house, how he had pulled her out, and how the structure had collapsed a few seconds later.

Carole had been on fire by then, screaming her daughter's name, kicking and biting as he pulled her away. All because the family had taken part in a brave but futile protest against the Imperial presence on Sulon. A Rebel leader named Morgan Katarn had spirited them away and brought them to Ruusan, but there was no escaping the memories.

Grif watched the image grow and knew it had locked on to the heat radiating off the airspeeder. The only question was whether the droid had been launched by an Imperial vessel on its way through the system, or by a ship in orbit. The first theory was consistent with the way Imperial scout ships were known to operate, while the second would explain why the weather satellites had gone off the air.

Not that it made a whole lot of difference, since the course of action would be the same. Destroy the probe, warn the others, and hope for the best. It was all that Grif or anyone else could do.

The settler's heart pounded against his chest as he ran downhill, skidded to a stop, and used his hunting knife to sever the tie-downs. The speeder creaked as he climbed aboard.

Work-thickened fingers stabbed at the controls, rows of lights appeared, and the repulsorlift engine whined into life. The machine rocked slightly as it came off the ground, faltered as energy tried to arc across two badly worn contacts, and steadied as Grif babied the controls.

Then, with Fido still circling above, the settler took off. He stood up in order to improve his visibility and felt the wind press against his face. Moonlight gleamed off the droid's highly polished skin. He aimed for the reflection and wished he had a plan.

"When in doubt, improvise," Grif mumbled to himself, grabbed the blast rifle racked along the port side, and removed the safety. A green "ready" light appeared as he rested the barrel on the top of the windshield and squeezed the trigger.

The energy pulse blipped outward, missed the probe by a good twenty meters, and disappeared.

Grif corrected his aim, fired again, and saw the bolt hit. The blast slagged one of the droid's sensors, took the shine off a few square centimeters of alloy skin, and triggered a preprogrammed response. The probe came equipped with four energy cannons, one for each point of the compass, and brought one of them to bear. The right side of the windshield disappeared as the energy beam slashed through it.

Grif swore, put the speeder into the tightest turn he could, and saw another beam pass through the air just vacated. The fight, if that's what it could properly be called, was anything but fair. What he needed was a way to even the odds.



The settler pushed the speeder down toward the surface. The lower he went, the more energy could be converted into forward momentum. The fact that the droid would be forced to convert more of its onboard computing capacity to low-level navigation amounted to a bonus.

Grif knew the territory ahead and knew the ground would rise. A ridge appeared, and he aimed for the V-shaped gap at the top. Energy strobed past, struck an outcropping, and sliced it off. The speeder passed through, banked to the right, and hugged the south side of the ridge.

The droid burst through the gap, lost the flyer's heat signature in the warmth radiating off the rock, and switched to holo cams.

Grif brought the speeder to a momentary halt, pulled the remote free of the control panel, and grabbed the blaster rifle. Then, praying there was enough time, the settler vaulted over the side.

His knees bent to absorb the shock, the rifle clattered as it hit the ground, and the remote filled his fist. He thumbed the "on" button, moved the slider forward, and watched the machine accelerate away.

The probe altered course and fired. The bolt missed. So far, so good. Now for the second and most crucial part of the plan . . .

Grif turned the directional knob to the right, waited for the airspeeder to respond accordingly, and swore when it didn't. As with so much of his homegrown equipment, the remote had a tendency to malfunction. He tried again with similar results.

The probe fired, the flyer staggered under the impact of a direct hit, and Grif turned the directional knob to the left. It worked this time, the next bolt missed, and the machine trailed smoke.

The settler gritted his teeth, twisted the control as far as it would go, and watched the speeder turn on its attacker. The droid fired, slagged what remained of the windshield, and prepared to finish what it had started.

The speeder completed its turn. Grif centered the

directional control, gave thanks when the vehicle lurched onto the correct path, and pushed the slider to max. "Sorry, old girl, but there's no other way."

The airspeeder picked up speed, fell as the engine slipped out of phase, and struggled to rise. The probe fired, missed, and triggered a targeting laser.

Grif stood, willed the speeder to endure another five seconds of punishment, and cheered as it bored in. "That's a baby! You can do it!"

The droid fired and was still in the process of firing when the speeder hit, and both machines exploded. A reddish-orange flower blossomed; sent long, fiery tendrils up into the sky; and was snuffed from existence.

Grif watched the debris tumble toward the ground and felt momentary elation quickly followed by despair. The Imperials had found Rutisan, and the dream was over. Nothing would be the same again.

Life, difficult though it had been, was about to get worse.

The settler considered his options. The smugglers had designed Fort Nowhere to withstand a force-one raid. Assuming the probe had been dropped into the planet's atmosphere by a passing ship, or belonged to a lightly armed scout, they still had a chance. If he could warn them. If they would listen. If they took action.

His transportation was spread all over the countryside, and Fort Nowhere was approximately fifty kilometers away. Which strategy should he pursue? Hoof it? Or return to the hill?

The comm set would be where he'd left it, sitting on top of the food locker. But what about the climb? What if he fell? A distinct possibility given the lack of climbing equipment.

Grif sighed, hoped Alpha would keep the herd together, and grabbed the blast rifle. It made a comforting weight. He turned toward the north and started to walk. He had a long way to go and nothing better to do.

The compartment, which was the largest the *Vengeance* had to offer, was almost painfully spartan.

No shelves, no pictures, and no keepsakes. Nothing but a standard bunk, a custom easy chair, and a crystal-clear bowl filled with multicolored touch-stones.

Some among the few privileged enough to enter the compartment assumed that the lack of ornament-ation stemmed from the fact that Jerec was blind and presumably uninterested in that which he couldn't see. They were wrong.

Others believed that the spartan conditions were the result of the severe discipline that the Jedi imposed on himself. They were wrong as well.

The truth, like the man to whom it pertained, was more complicated than that. Material things meant nothing to Jerec- not unless they added to his power- for to have power is to have physical objects when and where you want them.

Jerec settled into his chair, felt it adjust to his body, and allowed Borna's second symphony to flow over and around him. The composer had been a Rebel and the dark, moody music the Jedi enjoyed so much had been a protest against the Imperial government. It was too bad that Borna had died so young, but art and politics make poor bedfellows.

Jerec smiled and allowed his fingers to enter the bowl. The touchstones came in a variety of shapes, sizes, and textures. Some were smooth and cool to the touch, while others were coarse and warmed from within.

The Jedi selected what felt like a star, positioned it under his nose, and popped the casing. The scent of wild flowers entered his nostrils, formed a counterpoint to the music, and carried him away. He imagined the future, the throne upon which he would sit, and the power he would wield. All because of the planet below, and the secret hidden there.

The knock was so soft that Jerec could have ignored it had he chosen to do so. But he knew who it was and wanted to hear her report. "Enter."

Sariss was young, beautiful, and dressed in black. Her blood-red lips, nails, and collar made the black seem blacker. She entered the compartment, allowed the hatch to

close, and waited for Jerec to speak.

He ran his fingers through the stones, found a triangle, and offered it up. "For you, my dear."

Sariss viewed the tidbit with both annoyance and suspicion. It was his way of maintaining his power over her. A game to be played. Should she eat it? Pop and sniff? She could ask Jerec, and symbolically reaffirm his superiority, or take her chances. The Jedi had tried that once before. She remembered the way the casing had split open, the stench that had filled the air, and Boc's laughter. It had been a thoroughly unpleasant and humiliating experience.

Jerec, who could imagine her dilemma, smiled. "What? You would refuse my gift?"

Sariss steeled herself, plucked the stone from his fingers, and popped it into her mouth. "Not at all... Thank you for the treat."

The stone dissolved, vanilla-flavored syrup flooded her mouth, and Jerec chuckled. "Very good! I'm impressed! Now, tell me what you learned."

Sariss had a mind like a steel trap. She reeled off the facts from memory. "Phase one of the survey is complete. Phase two is underway."

Sariss produced a handheld holo projector and pressed a button. A likeness of Ruusan filled the center of the room. Jerec couldn't see it—but liked subordinates to pretend that he could. It made the Jedi seem omniscient, which added to the mystique associated with his name. The image started to rotate, and Sariss used it to focus her thoughts.

"Both the atmosphere and gravity are well within Class Three parameters. Surface mapping is 93.4 percent complete. Surface and subsurface scans reveal significant mineral deposits, including iron, copper, cesium, iridium, nickel, uranium, and a good many more. Of equal interest are seven already-exploited mines, all thousands of years old, none in production."

"Are they in or near the target area?"

"No, my lord. In spite of the fact that the subsurface probes confirm an extensive system of caves within the

confines of the valley, they are not associated with significant mineral deposits. And while the facilities required to process ore might have disappeared over the millennia, the probes found no sign of tailings."

Jerec nodded. "Continue."

"The planet supports two cultures. The first consists of approximately 20,000 preindustrial sentients. They seem to be indigenous, although surface artifacts suggest that other species lived here as well, raising the possibility that they originated somewhere else."

"Yes," Jerec agreed. "The legends speak of many species and a rich civilization. Tell me more about the humans."

Sariss shrugged. "There isn't much to tell . . . Space trash mostly, mixed with dissidents. The probes kept their distance but were able to monitor and record their comm traffic. Content analysis, combined with call mapping, confirms that most of the humans live and work in the vicinity of a Class Two military installation."

Jerec's eyebrows shot upward. "A military installation?"

"Yes, my lord. It appears that a gang of smugglers uses Ruusan to warehouse their contraband and built the fort to protect their property. They call it 'Fort Nowhere.' A rather apt name, all things considered. Our forces will attack tomorrow."

"No," Jerec said firmly, "They won't. Not without a visit. Take Yun and Boc. See what you can learn. Report to me."

The fact that Jerec had seen fit to countermand her plans brought blood to Sariss' face. His approval meant a great deal to her, and she worked hard to maintain it. Making a bad situation even worse was the fact that she disagreed with his orders.

She cleared her throat. "May I ask why, my lord? Wouldn't such a visit put them on alert? And cause additional casualties among our troops?"

Jerec allowed himself a frown. "You doubt our ability to win?"

"No, my lord. Of course not."

"Good. There are reasons for my orders even when they

aren't apparent to you. These people have lived on the planet for some time. Are they aware of the Valley? And if they are, did they loot the chambers? And if they did, what happened to the materials found there?"

They were intelligent questions, and the fact that she had failed to consider them brought even more blood to the Jedi's cheeks. She bowed, assured Jerec that his orders would be implemented, and backed out into the corridor.

Jerec waited until his subordinate had left, allowed his fingers to trail through the touchstones, and found a treat. It was shaped like Ruusan and cool to the touch. He brought it to his lips, popped the sphere into his mouth, and broke the outer skin. The liqueur tasted of cinnamon and contained a mild intoxicant. He smiled, thought about the embarrassment Sariss had experienced, and laughed out loud.

Grif was tired, very tired. He was in better shape than most men his age- no, half his age- but fifty kilometers is a long way to go. The sun had both risen and set since the battle with the droid.

He paused, took a moment to check his back trail, and produced a self-satisfied grunt. The sky was clear, the triplets were up, and there was nothing to be seen. No droids, skimmers, or speeder bikes rushing to catch up with him. Perhaps the probe had been on its own. He hoped so.

Mountains had forced the settler toward the west. Assuming he was right, and this was the reverse slope of "Katarn's Hill," he was almost there.

Gravel slid out from under the colonist's boots. He swore, resisted the temptation to use the blast rifle as a walking stick, and fought his way upward.

The stench of a garbage-filled ravine confirmed his skill as a navigator. Grif wrinkled his nose, hurried to put the odor behind him, and crested the hill.

The homes, many of which had been sited with help from Morgan Katarn, were more than half buried in the soil, a strategy that helped them stay cool during the day and warm at night.

A scattering of yellow-orange rectangles marked the location of windows and hinted at the hospitality that waited within. Grif passed them by. It was evening, and that meant the majority of the colony's elected and unelected leaders would be gathered within the Smuggler's Rest, drinks in hand.

Grif licked his lips at the thought, ignored the half-tamed bush runner that lunged at the end of its chain, and followed the well-worn path toward the fort. He heard a snatch of conversation, the slamming of a door, and the whine of a multi-tool. Common sounds that he found comforting.

Fort Nowhere was laid out in the shape of a six-pointed star. Blaster cannons had been mounted at each of the star's points, a strategy that would place attackers in a withering crossfire.

The cannons, plus hidden missile batteries, were a potent threat against anything short of an Imperial assault, the very thing he had come to warn them about.

A man called out from the shadows and asked, "Who goes there?" in a voice that didn't seem to care.

The settler paused. "Grif Grawley."

The sentry, a smuggler named Horley, stepped out into the moonlight. "Grif? Carole called. She's worried sick."

"I'll get back to her," Grif promised. "Soon as I can. Where's the fat guy who thinks he's mayor?"

Horley chuckled. "Same as always, sitting around the Rest, complaining about the Empire."

"Good. Keep a sharp eye out, or there might be even more to complain about."

The sentry wanted to ask what the comment meant, but Grawley was gone. Horley shivered, blamed the cool night breeze, and turned toward the badlands. Clouds claimed the triplets, and darkness obscured the land.

Grif heard the Smuggler's Rest before he actually saw it. The music, popular on Corellia two years before, was punctuated by laughter and the bong of the drink gong. Someone had bought a round.

Grif rounded a corner, nodded to a passing spacer, and strode the width of the inner courtyard. The all-too-familiar doors swung open at the touch of his hand, and he blinked in the sudden light. The bar had been crafted from a damaged fuel tank and lined one side of the room. A dozen mismatched tables made islands on the seldom-swept floor. The walls, which were covered with an unplanned montage of memorabilia, had launched many a story. There were fifteen or twenty people present. They turned as he entered the room.

"Look!" someone exclaimed. "It's Grif Grawley! Hey, Grif! Carole's looking for volunteers. Ya ain't gettin' any lighter, ya know!"

There was a chorus of guffaws as regulars had a laugh at Grif 's expense. They remembered the night six months before, on the eve of little Katie's birthday, when Grif had attempted to anesthetize himself with an entire bottle of Old Trusty. Carole had been summoned and, with help from the regulars had loaded him onto a skimmer. Anger flared, anger and resentment.

Grif swiveled toward his right, fired from the hip, and watched the sound system explode. Silence settled over the bar, interrupted only by the drip, drip, drip of liquefied components and the cooler's monotonous hum. Mayor Devo, his paunch hanging over his belt, was the first to recover. He came to his feet. A stubby index finger stabbed the air.

"And that will be enough of that! We've had enough from you, Grif Grawley. Place the weapon on the floor and take three steps backward."

The settler made no effort to obey. He reached under his jacket, found the flat piece of metal, and pulled it free of his waistband. It clanged as it hit the table.

Devo looked down and up again. He frowned. "And what's this supposed to be?"

"An ID plate. Read it."

Reluctantly, his face flushed with anger, the mayor did as he was told. The words seemed to echo through the bar.



"Imperial Probe Droid PD 4786. So? What's your point?"

Grif allowed his eyes to roam the room. "So, I tangled with an Imperial probe droid, rammed it with my airspeeder, and hoofed it here. It could have been a loner, dumped into our atmosphere by a passing ship, or it could be part of something a lot worse. I suggest you pack what you can, load your families on skimmers, and follow me. There are places where you can hide."

There was silence for a moment followed by complete pandemonium. It seemed as if everyone had something to say.

"Throw the idiot out!"

"What if he's right? How did they find us?"

"I told you this would happen . . ."

"Grif wouldn't know a probe droid if it was floating in his whiskey."

Grif tapped the gong with a half-empty bottle of Old Trusty. The babble ceased. "Believe what you want. One question, though. How do you explain the fact that the weather sats are down? Not just one of them, but the whole bunch?"

The settler turned toward a woman named Peeno. She was Captain Jerg's second in command and some said more than that. "How 'bout it, Marie? You got those sats up and running, vet?"

The smuggler, a woman with short red hair and a nose stud, shook her head. "They all went down about the same time. We've been unable to contact them since."

Grif persisted. "How 'bout ships? Got any in orbit?"

Jerg had left more than thirty days before and had taken the shuttles with him. Everyone knew he was gone, and everyone knew it would be another month before he returned. Peeno shook her head again.

"Just as I thought. Heads in the sand, butts in the air. Good luck, 'cause you're gonna need it."

So saying, the settler took a long, hard pull from the bottle in his hand, slammed it down, and tossed a coin onto the bar. It spun, fell, and landed heads-up.

Grif was halfway across the courtyard by the time the yelling started —and only twenty klicks from home. It would be good to see Carole.

The sun had been up for some time when the Imperial assault shuttle approached from the south. It made a series of circles, each smaller than the last, as if those on board were sightseeing, which in a sense they were.

Sariss released her safety harness, stepped into the cockpit, and peered over the pilots' heads. Fort Nowhere shimmered in the heat.

"What a dump."

Yun, a young, almost-boyish Jedi with a shock of brown hair, moved to join her. Partly because he was curious and partly because she was his mentor. "That's for sure. I don't know what they ran away from, but it must have been pretty bad."

"It was pretty bad," Boc agreed, as he took up a position behind them. "They were running from us."

Peeno's head tracked the shuttle in concert with the fort's energy cannon. She wore a headset, torso armor, and carried her blast rifle on a sling. The number-three gunner, a colonist named Dinko, wanted to fire. "I can take her, lieutenant! Just say the word."

The shuttle turned, and Peeno turned with it. "Not a good idea, Dinko. That assault boat didn't come here all by herself. There's at least one ship, maybe more, in orbit above. If they wanted to grease us, they would have done it by now. Take your weapon off-line ... and that goes for the rest of you. They want to talk, so let's give them the chance."

The shuttle flared, gave the colonists a peek at the registration numbers painted on its belly, and settled onto the pad. Grit sprayed sideways, and the noise brought even more of Fort Nowhere's citizens to the scene.

The settlers had expected stormtroopers, followed by an officer, but were in for a surprise. Eyes widened and mouths dropped as Sariss, Yun, and Boc exited the ship.

"Who are they?"

"They have lightsabers!"

"What's a worm-head doing here?"

"What's wrong with you people? Shoot them!"

The last comment came from a settler named Lasko. His first wife had given her life in defense of the Sulon G-Tap. The very sight of the Imperials filled him with hate.

The intensity of his emotions sent ripples through the Force. Sariss stopped, turned, and picked Lasko out of the crowd. The colonist looked surprised, brought his hands up to his throat, and struggled to breathe. His face turned blue, his knees buckled, and he thumped to the ground. Then, just as the life force started to leak out of his body Sariss relented.

Lasko sucked air into his aching lungs, rubbed his throat, and stood. His friends and neighbors averted their eyes as the settler shouldered his way through the crowd. Then, having put the throng behind him, Lasko broke into a run. He had a new wife now and a six-month-old baby. He'd load the skimmer, head out into the badlands, and hope for the best.

Sariss took pleasure in the fear that surrounded her. Thanks to the settler, and his big mouth, a lesson had been learned. Resist, and you will die.

The crowd started to back away, to disperse, but Yun shook his head. "What's the hurry? Stick around. You'll stay healthy that way."

Boc started to laugh, a high-pitched gibbering sound that brought fear to the settlers' faces. Sariss stood with hands on hips. "So, who's in charge?"

There was silence, followed by sidelong glances and the shuffling of feet. That's when Mayor Devo was nudged, shouldered, and pushed out into the open. Once exposed, the politician tried to make the best of a bad situation. He adjusted his paunch, found a smile, and took three steps forward. "That would be me . . . Mayor Byron Devo III at your service. And you are?"

"My name is unimportant," Sariss replied coldly "The

important thing is that you, and your treasonous constituents, have established an illegal settlement for the purposes of smuggling and tax evasion. Both punishable by death."

Devo swallowed, realized that his hands had gone to his throat, and forced them down. It seemed as if the woman knew everything. Still, words had gotten him out of trouble before, and they might do so again. "No, no, you've got it all wrong! Give me a chance to explain!"

Sariss looked doubtful. "You have an explanation? That seems hard to believe. Still, everyone deserves a chance. That's the Imperial way . . . Take me to your office. You have one, don't you?"

"Oh, yes!" Devo burred happily. "Follow me . . ."

The crowd parted to let them through. Yun smiled, and Boc laughed.

It took less than an hour for Sariss to pump Devo full of false assurances, drain the politician of relevant information, and confirm her findings through subsequent conversations with Peeno and the tapcafe keeper.

Yun, with assistance from Boc, used the time to survey Fort Nowhere's defenses. More than 300 pairs of eyes watched the Jedi board their ship and lift off. Mayor Devo, eager to reassert his authority and regain whatever credibility he might have lost, offered an obscene gesture.

"That's for you and the Emperor!"

The shuttle had just disappeared over the horizon as Peeno sidled up. "So, Byron, what do you think? Why all the interest in ruins and artifacts?"

Devo had small, beady eyes. They darted hither and yon. "Something valuable would be my guess. Something worth sending a task force to Ruusan."

Peeno nodded. "Exactly, so keep it to yourself. Who knows? Maybe we can find it."

Devo's eyes glazed over as visions of valuable treasure danced in his head. "It could be ours, Marie! All ours!"

Peeno nodded, wondered if the Imperials were that stupid, and feared that they weren't.



The bridge of *Vengeance* was large and open as befitted a capital ship. Jerec, hands clasped behind his back, stood with his back to the command area. The crew, who occupied semi-circular trenches cut into the highly reflective deck, hung on every word. He liked it that way. His voice was pitched to carry.

"And your conclusion?"

Sariss, who like Yun and Boc was still aboard the shuttle, brought her report to a close. A holo of her head and shoulders hovered in the air. "So, my lord, based on interviews with members of the criminal community and the squalor in which they are forced to live, it seems safe to conclude that the Valley remains undiscovered."

Jerec paused, allowed the tension to build, and nodded his head. "I concur. Destroy the settlement."

The Imperial raiding party had been gathering for more than twenty-six hours. The flat area, surrounded by hills, made a perfect staging area. A maintenance facility had been set up, fuel bladders had been buried, and a perimeter established. It was patrolled by a pair of AT-ST walkers and supported by heavily armed troopers.

The unit, which would depend on speed, surprise, and overwhelming force, consisted of four assault shuttles and six TIE fighters. They were manned by the best the larger task force had to offer and ready for action.

Sariss, her hair whipped by desert wind, took one last look at the ships under her command and spoke into the wire-thin boom mike. "All right, you know the plan. TIE fighters first . . . assault boats second. Let's wind 'em up."

The Jedi felt the ramp bounce under her weight as she entered the ship. She slipped into the co-pilot's position, fastened her harness, and gave the pilot a nod. He ran up the power, pulled back on the controls, and scanned the readouts. The ship rose, rocked in the breeze, and vectored away. The rest of the shuttles followed.

The smugglers had anticipated the possibility of a space-

borne attack, which was the reason for the satellites. However, once the orbital surveillance system had been neutralized, and with no ground-based detectors to fall back on, the attack would have caught the colony by surprise if it had not been for the Jedi's visit. Still, even with advance warning, they were only partially prepared.

The TIE fighters came first, low and slow, their cannons spitting death. The initial volley punched holes in the rammed earth walls, destroyed the southern gate, and set a storage shed on fire. The smoke made an excellent marker and helped orient the pilots during successive attacks.

The fort's defenses were manned. Peeno had seen to that. Turrets swiveled as gunners tracked the incoming ships, and Dinko whooped with joy. "I nailed one of the slimeballs, lieutenant, look at that!"

Peeno, who was directing the defensive effort from an underground bunker, consulted her monitors. There weren't very many of them, all sitting on an old cargo module, connected by a maze of wires. She watched a TIE fighter explode, saw flaming debris fall on Katarn's Hill, and knew there would be casualties. "Nice shooting, Dinko, keep it up."

"We have four inbound assault shuttles . . . range, thirty clicks."

Peeno didn't recognize the voice but was thankful for the information. The fort's line-of-sight, target-acquisition system consisted of volunteers equipped with electrobinoculars.

She turned to her weapons-control officer, a grim-faced sixteen-year old with an aptitude for electronics. "Missile status?"

"Ready . . ."

"Prepare to launch . . . launch."

The youngster tapped some keys. Hatches slid clear, a flight of six missiles soared into the sky and flew down range.

"We've got 'em!" the teenager said excitedly. "We've got 'em!"

"Maybe," Peeno replied levelly "and maybe not. Prepare flight two."

Sariss watched impassively as the first TIE fighter exploded, cursed the pilot for a fool, and felt the shuttle jink to port.

"Blew chaff," the pilot reported laconically. "Surface-to-air missiles inbound . . . air-to-air outbound."

The pilot thumbed a button, and two flights of four missiles raced away Sariss felt the shuttle jerk and saw reddish-orange flowers populate the sky. The pilot kept count. "Three, four, five . . ."

"And six," Sariss said dryly, as shuttle number three staggered, veered off course, and hit the side of a hill.

Then the fort was below, still fighting, in spite of the fact that three of its ball turrets had been destroyed and that a forty-meter section of wall had been breached.

Antlike figures could be seen running in all directions, while others sought the comparative safety of the underground caves. A TIE fighter swooped in on a strafing run, mowed an entire row of fugitives, and roared away

"Put her down," Sariss said grimly. "Some of the criminals are getting away."

The pilot nodded, put the ship into a tight turn, and chinned the intercom. "Thirty to dirt . . . stand by."

Forty stormtroopers had been crammed into the cargo area. They pulled one last check on their weapons and waited for the moment of impact. It came with a thump, tone, and green light. Daylight appeared, the ramp fell, and an officer began to yell. "Go! Go! Go!"

They went. Ground fire stuttered out to greet them, one fell, and the rest charged.

The shuttle rocked under the impact of a shoulder-launched missile but remained undamaged. Sariss, who was unarmed with the exception of her lightsaber, strolled down the ramp. An energy beam whipped by her head, knocked a trooper off his feet, and left her untouched. That's when she saw Devo, waddling out to meet her, his face contorted with fear.

"What are you doing? I answered your questions. You promised to leave us alone!"

The Jedi smiled. "Why, Mayor Devo! Nice to see you again. Politicians tell so many lies that I assumed you knew one when you heard it."

Sariss lit the lightsaber. It crackled and popped. The settler, eyes the size of saucers, tried to retreat. Energy sizzled, and his head flew off his shoulders and rolled down the slope.

It took fifteen minutes to subdue the fort and another twenty to clear the underground caves. Some of the colonists had managed to escape, Sariss knew that, but wasn't inclined to follow. The long and none-too-glamorous job of extermination could be left to junior officers and stormtroopers. Her task was done.

The Jedi waited for Boc to finish off a wounded settler, ordered Yun to destroy the subsurface farms, and climbed a nearby hill. A half-buried dwelling crackled as it burned, a woman lay dead a few feet away, and a gra fought to break its tether.

Sariss gained the summit, looked out across the badlands, and wondered what the planet had been like when the forces of light and darkness had clashed out on the plains. When artificial lightning had split the sky, when Jedi had fallen like wheat before a combine, and the stink of ozone filled the air.

The fact that such battles had occurred was incredible enough, but even more amazing was the fact that the ancient ones were still there, hidden in their Valley, waiting for someone to command their power. Jerrec? Yes, probably, but with her at his side. The wind swept in off the plains, caused her cape to snap, and blew smoke toward the east. The first battle had been fought, and the first battle had been won.



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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Fire rippled along the *New Hope's* port side as a squadron of Imperial TIE bombers fought their way through Rebel defenses and launched their proton torpedoes. The deflector shields had gone down ten minutes before, so some of them were bound to get through.

Leia Organa Solo felt the hull shudder, met Mon Mothma's gaze, and knew what she was thinking. The Dreadnaught's best days were behind it. Last stationed over Churba, where it had served as a war museum, the ship had been a symbol of Imperial dominance. A symbol that Rebel forces had stolen and towed away. The victory was largely psychological, but a hull is a hull, and the Rebels needed hulls. That being the case, the Dreadnaught underwent a complete overhaul, was rechristened the *New Hope*, and hurriedly pressed into service.

Still, that being said, the *Hope* was no match for newer vessels half her size and served as a mobile HQ. She'd been in orbit around Milagro for a couple of months now, where she had provided the Rebel command structure with a space-going platform.

That's why both women knew the Dreadnaught wouldn't stand a chance against a Star Destroyer, wondered why the Imperial ship hadn't closed with them, and were thankful it hadn't. TIE bombers were one thing, but the massive weapons the Destroyer could bring to bear were something else. Not that they were about to say anything in front of the bridge crew. Morale was high, and they wanted to keep it

that way.

Damage reports continued to flood in. "Turbolaser battery fourteen took a direct hit..."

"We have a pressure leak in compartment A-Forty-three."

"The port sensor array is gone ... along with escape pods sixty through sixty-nine..."

The bridge crew, under the somewhat stoic command of a Mon Calamari named Captain Tola, acknowledged the reports and assigned appropriate resources to deal with them.

Mon Mothma, her hair still damp from a hastily interrupted shower, looked composed as usual. A silver pin secured her robe, which hung in orderly folds. "Any news from General Solo?"

Leia knew the question was rhetorical but answered anyway. "No, all three squadrons should be on the far side of Milagro by now, preparing to slingshot around."

Mon Mothma nodded absently. There was so much to consider. The first of the three squadrons belonged to the *Hope* and consisted of crack pilots in nearly new X-wing starfighters. Squadrons two and three were something else again. The pilots, many of whom were still recovering from wounds received earlier, had been recruited off the hospital ship *Mercy* and ferried down to Milagro's surface.

Once there they were assigned a mishmash of old Y-wings, reconditioned X-wings, and, miracle of all miracles, two B-wings, just cleared for battle. It was these forces, under the command of General Han Solo, that would decide the battle. If they could find the Star Destroyer from which the TIE bombers had been launched, and if they could neutralize it. Adding to the urgent need for a Rebel victory was the fact that a Battle Group had been dispatched six days before. A force that could return victorious or badly mauled and in need of support.

All of which raised another question: Had the Imperials known the *New Hope* was vulnerable? And if so, how? Had a probe droid stumbled across their hiding place? Had the Imperials planted a spy in the Rebel command structure?

Mon Mothma sighed. The possibilities were endless ... and explained why she rarely got enough sleep.

A familiar voice came over one of the ship-to-ship comm channels. "Solo here ... we're approaching the North Pole and about to break the planetary horizon. Give us the latest."

A powerful computer had been used to analyze Imperial attack vectors, comm traffic, and exit paths. And it was that information, combined with stats on the TIE bombers' fuel consumption, that would provide the Rebel attack force with the Star Destroyer's probable location. Or so they hoped, since the best way to prevent the capital ship from launching TIEs or engaging the *New Hope* directly, was to take her out or, failing that, to chase her away.

The Rebel starfighters broke the planetary horizon, received the information they needed, and altered course. "Got it," the voice confirmed. "Keep my dinner warm. Over."

Leia smiled, knew the comment was directed to her, and remembered the meal she and Han had nearly shared. There had been wine, candles, and the possibility of -

A hand touched Leia's arm. She turned, reached out to steady the comm tech as the Dreadnaught took another hit, and smiled reassuringly. "Yes?"

"A comm call for you, ma'am," the young man stuttered, "From your brother."

Leia frowned. "From Luke? Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am," the tech nodded emphatically. "He's on frequency six, channel four."

Luke Skywalker had left the Dreadnaught two weeks earlier, first to carry out a mission of his own, then to check on Kyle Katarn and Jan Ors.

After obtaining plans that enabled the Alliance to destroy the Imperial Death Star, the agents had taken on a new mission: the search for the Valley of the Jedi. A mission Skywalker considered important and hoped would succeed. Now he had returned and at the worst possible time.

Leia hurried to a console and the holo of Luke Skywalker's face. He wore a helmet and flight suit.

"Luke! Turn back! We're under attack!"

"No kidding," the Jedi said dryly. "We noticed. A pair of TIE fighters jumped us as we left hyperspace. We nailed 'em, but it looks like there are more up ahead."

"We?"

"The *Moldy Crow* is off my starboard wing. Kyle Katarn and Jan Ors send their best."

"Break it off," Leia urged. "There are too many of them between you and us. Han and three squadrons of starfighters are looking for the Imperial Destroyer now."

"Too late," Skywalker said laconically "We found it, or they found us! She's a Destroyer all right, *Imperial*-class by the look of her, with bow damage. I see plenty of escorts . . . thirty, maybe more. Could be worse, though, since at least half appear to be transports."

"What was that?" Mon Mothma demanded, appearing at Leia's side. "Did Luke say 'damaged'?"

"I sure did," Skywalker answered. "I see major damage to the Destroyer's bow as if something hit her or she hit it. Han can home on my transponder while we give her something to think about."

Mon Mothma brought her fist down on the console. A stylus jumped in response. "That's it! That's why the Destroyer didn't come after us- she's damaged! She dropped into this system looking for a place to hide and found us waiting for her! Captain Tola! Inform General Solo and prepare to break orbit."

If Tola was upset by the way in which a civilian ordered him around, he gave no sign of it. Orders were given, the Dreadnaught broke orbit, and the counterattack began.

The *Hope* lurched as an Imperial pilot lost control of his fighter and slammed into the hull. The explosion destroyed cooling stack three and burned itself out. The lights flickered, steadied, and held.

Mon Mothma looked at Leia. "It's going to be close."

The younger woman nodded, felt her fingernails bite into the palms of her hands, and fought to maintain her composure. "Yes, very close indeed."



The *Moldy Crow* did a wing over as Jan Ors fought to stay on Luke Skywalker's tail. The Jedi Knight's X-wing was smaller, faster, and a good deal more maneuverable than the Corellian-built ship.

Originally designed to carry small but critical cargoes to asteroid miners and orbital space stations, the *Crow* had served many purposes since then, many of which weren't exactly legal. That being the case, she could deliver a fair turn of speed and carried more armament than most ships her size.

Something for which Jan was thankful given Luke Skywalker's seemingly suicidal decision to engage what looked like half the Imperial Navy.

"Here they come!"

The transmission seemed somewhat unnecessary, given the number of targets that filled her view screen. Jan resisted the temptation to duck as coherent energy blipped over the *Crow's* hull and began the endless journey into space.

Skywalker fired in return and had the satisfaction of seeing one enemy ship explode and another tumble out of control as Jan added the weight of her weapons to his.

Kyle Katarn sat in the co-pilot's seat, wished he had something to do, and ground his teeth in frustration. The *Crow* was his ship, but Jan had been at the controls when the fight started, and there was no acceptable way to usurp her position. Not that such a move would made much sense since she was the better pilot.

All of which left Kyle helpless . . . or did it? Unlike most Jedi, who serve an apprenticeship under a Master, Kyle had been forced to work on his talents on his own, or almost on his own, since he did receive occasional guidance from the now-disembodied Jedi known as Rahn.

And among the many things Kyle had learned was the fact that there is no weapon more powerful than an open mind.

Take the present situation for example: There was an opportunity somewhere in front of him, and all he had to do

was find it. The situation reminded Kyle of the set-piece battles he'd been required to study at the Imperial Military Academy. A career he had pursued in order to get an education, but abandoned after his father had been murdered. Murdered and his head placed on a spike for all to see. Kyle hadn't been there, but he'd seen a holo, and the image haunted his dreams.

The Imperial Star Destroyer seemed to swell in size. Support ships surrounded the larger vessel and opened fire. Kyle saw that they had formed a protective globe around the Destroyer, which, though heavily armed, was temporarily vulnerable due to the bow damage and the ongoing need to launch and retrieve TIE fighters, many of which were occupied elsewhere.

Suddenly Kyle had it, the perfect place to hide, even though the enemy would know exactly where they were. Not forever, just long enough for the Rebel fighters to arrive.

"Jan! Luke! Go for the center of their formation. Get between the Destroyer and her escorts, and maintain that position as long as you can."

Skywalker put the X-wing into a tight turn, fired at a TIE fighter, noticed it was one of the newer models- a GT if memory served him correctly- and considered the agent's suggestion. The idea seemed suicidal at first, until the beauty of it struck him. By placing themselves between the capital ship and her escorts, they would force the Imperials to break formation, fire at each other in an attempt to hit the Rebel ships, or cease firing altogether!

"Good idea, Kyle . . . if we can get there in one whole piece. I'm going in..."

Han Solo checked to make sure that the Rebel attack group was still closing on course, saw that they were, and turned to his companion. "Let's run a last-minute check, Chewie, how's that power coupler? I'd sure hate to have it burn out with a couple of TIE fighters on our tails."

Though able to understand Basic, Chewbacca wasn't

equipped to speak it. He growled resentfully; stabbed at some buttons, and pointed at a display.

Han frowned. "Yeah, I can read, but just because it looks good now doesn't mean it'll stay that way."

Chewbacca made a moaning sound, started to release his harness, and stopped when a voice came over the group's comm frequency. "Medpac One to Group Leader."

Han smiled. There had been very little time for niceties such as call signs. That being the case, the second squadron, mainly comprised of walking wounded, had chosen their own. "I read you, Medpac One ... go. Over."

"The bandits are coming out to play ... twenty, maybe more. Over."

Han cursed the need for the *Millennium Falcon* to lag behind, protected by a screen of Y-wings, and wished he could see the enemy for himself. It didn't make sense though, not with such a makeshift unit.

Leadership would be crucial, and there wouldn't be any if he were killed during the first few minutes of battle. "Roger that ... you'll see even more as they pull fighters off the *Hope* and send 'em our way. Remember, don't let the Imps suck us into multiple dog fights. Go for the Destroyer."

"Roger," Medpac One said with a cheerfulness he really didn't feel. "Engaging now."

The next fifteen minutes were some of the longest in Han's life. Medpac One and his squadron absorbed the initial attack, lost two X-wings, and bored through. The weight of three full squadrons, no matter how iffy some of the individual ships might be, was hard to resist.

The officer in charge of the Imperial Task Force continually sent two-ship flights in to pull Rebel fighters away and thereby weaken the counterattack. Han, who had the instincts of a loner and had never enjoyed following other people's orders, found himself in the somewhat ironic position of maintaining ironclad discipline. Pilots who succumbed to temptation, or were cut off through no fault of their own, were left to fend for themselves as the larger force broke through wave after wave of TIE fighters.

Minidramas, too many to count, played themselves out.

"Break right, Medpac Three! There's one on your tail."

"Yahoo! Eat energy, you scum-sucking Imperial!"

"Watch your six ... two on the way."

"Hey; you! In the Y-wing ... follow me."

"It hurts ... it hurts so bad ..."

"I'm on it, Blue Six ... keep her steady ..."

Then, through the mishmash of comet traffic, Han heard what he'd been waiting for. "Medpac Four to Group Leader ... I have a visual on the Imperial Task Force, repeat, a visual on the Imperial Task Force."

Han sideslipped to avoid the remains of a TIE fighter, fired at another, and sent a thought toward Luke. "Hang in there, kid ... we're almost there ..."

The X-wing rocked from side to side, dodged laser fire, and bored in. Luke could almost hear Yoda's voice:

*"Have a pattern things do, starting with the subatomic structure of the pebble in your hand and extending to the stars themselves. Hmmm, yes. Find the pattern, understand the manner in which it was woven, and nothing shall stand in your way."*

Each of the Imperial ships had its own fire-control center, and all of those centers had been slaved to a computer aboard the Destroyer. While this strategy made maximum use of the Task Force's weaponry, it also created a pattern that Luke could feel.

The trick was to direct his mind toward understanding the individual subpatterns that contributed to the whole but to do so without conscious thought, because conscious thought took time and led to doubt.

That being the case, Luke "sensed" where to direct his ship, fired when instinct told him to do so, and wove his way through a maze of outgoing laser fire. The *Moldy Crow*, still in one piece and still on Luke's tail, followed behind.

Jan, her hands dancing between controls, spoke from the side of her mouth. "Did you see that? It's as if he knows



which way to go."

Kyle, who had made a good deal of progress where his own talents were concerned, nodded admiringly "That's because he does know which way to go. Stay on his tail."

Jan triggered the ship's cannons, winced as the *Crow* sped through the resulting explosion, and watched the Destroyer grow in size. The Rebel ships had penetrated the outer screen by then and were passing through the second.

Lights flashed as a chunk of TIE fighter hit the deflector shield, caused an overload, and spun away. Imperial Naval Captain Purdy M. Trico watched the holo screens, listened to the comm traffic, and wondered why the gods had decided to abandon him. A hand strayed to a bulge in his uniform. The amulet had always worked before. What had changed?

The Imperial power structure frowned on gods, any sort of gods, especially those believed to have more power than the state. But that hadn't stopped Trico from worshipping the same entities his forefathers had, not at the Academy, where such worship could result in expulsion, and not during the subsequent years when discovery would have ruined his career.

So why had the gods deserted him during his hour of need? Why had Mugg, Bron, and the great Pula allowed the Rebel gunship to ram his Destroyer? And then, when he sought the relative safety of a war-ravaged solar system, why had they cursed him with a Dreadnaught? Not to mention the swarm of hostile fighters? Even now, two Rebel ships were drilling in through his defenses as if protected from all harm.

The reverie, which had lasted little more than a few seconds, ended as the sometimes-meddlesome executive officer vied for his attention. "Sorry to bother you, sir . . . but the Rebel Dreadnaught broke orbit and is headed this way."

Trico came from a heavy gravity world and, being of the fourth generation, had the physique of a meter-and-a-half-tall weight lifter. Muscles bunched and writhed as he fought

the impulse to twist the other officer's head off. " 'Has' broken orbit? Did you say 'has'? Why wasn't I notified when this evolution began?"

The XO found it difficult to swallow. Though more competent than some, Trico had a reputation as something of a martinet, and a volatile one at that. "Because our fighters were trying to intercept the Rebels ... sir."

Trico could hear the gods laughing. He forced his voice to remain steady. "You allowed that? None of our fighters were detailed to monitor the Dreadnaught? A vessel that, though dated, has plating thicker than ours and mounts major offensive weapons?"

The XO started to tremble. "It wasn't my fault . . . I thought . . ."

A hole appeared at the center of the executive officer's forehead, and his eyes crossed as he was trying to get a look at it. The body made a thumping sound as it hit the deck.

Trico holstered his weapon and looked up to find that the Rebel ships, the two he had observed earlier, had not only penetrated his innermost defenses, they'd done so with impunity. His index finger trembled as he pointed at the holo. "What are you waiting for? Destroy them!"

"Yes, sir," the weapons-control officer replied shakily. "Shall we destroy our escorts as well?" The question sounded insubordinate—but wasn't.

Trico looked again, realized that the Rebs had taken their positions on purpose, and swore a terrible oath. "Pula, take them! I'll teach the dogs some respect . . . break formation!"

The entire bridge crew knew it was a mistake, but no one had the courage to say so. Not with the XO's body still where it had fallen. Orders were given, relayed to the proper parties, and acted upon.

Slowly, with a dignity befitting a ship of her size and importance, a gap opened between the Destroyer and her escorts.

Luke saw the movement, knew what it meant, and opened his throttles. The X-wing shot forward.

"Jan ! Kyle! Follow me!"

Jan shoved the throttles to their stops, felt the gee forces push her back into the seat, and uttered a silent prayer.

Energy pulsed outward as the Destroyer fired her main batteries and the escorts did likewise. The glare created by the beams of energy caused the view screens to darken and left the Rebels blind. Their deflector shields flared to the edge of burnout and held. Time seemed to slow.

"Group Leader to Command," Han said evenly. "We have closed with the enemy and are about to engage. The Destroyer broke formation. Her deflector shields are down in order to retrieve fighters, and she's firing away from us. I recommend that you bring the *Hope* into action."

Mon Mothma looked at Captain Tola and waited for the Mon Calamari's judgment. It had been an error to order the ship out of orbit without consulting him-. and one which she refused to repeat. Yes, she knew what she would do, but the decision was his.

Leia held her breath, was thankful that the decision belonged to someone else, and did her best to appear unconcerned.

Captain Tola, well aware of the silence that had descended over the bridge, gave a nod. The Dreadnaught might be a museum piece, but the odds were as good as they were likely to get. "You heard the general! This is the chance we've been waiting for! There's a Destroyer out there! Let's give her a history lesson."

Captain Trico was furious. "You missed them, blast your worthless hide! Two ships and you missed them both! You are incompetent, sir, and a disgrace to this ship."

"The Dreadnaught means to engage, sir," the weapons-control officer replied desperately. "I recommend we rejoin our escorts, or take the entire Task Force into hyperspace."

"And leave more than a hundred TIE pilots to die?" Captain Trico demanded coldly. "Have you lost your mind? Or just your nerve?"

Trico was reaching for his sidearm, preparing to eliminate still another incompetent, when a comm tech interrupted. "Here they come, sir! Rebel fighters followed by the Dreadnaught!"

Trico spun, his face contorted in anger, his right index finger pointed like a gun. The entire bridge crew blanched. "You will stand and fight! I will shoot the first man to leave his post!"

The weapons-control officer watched his subordinates from the corners of his eyes, knew they wouldn't back him, and turned to the control consoles. "You heard the captain. Let's get to work."

The ensuing battle lasted more than three hours, but was never really in doubt. Cut off from her escorts, and with only a handful of TIE fighters to defend her, the Destroyer was not only weakened but downright vulnerable. Still, the Imperials continued to fight, not valiantly but because Trico insisted that they do so.

Finally, after the hull had been repeatedly breached and more than half the laser batteries silenced, the weapons officer, knowing that the bridge recorders had captured his commanding officer's eccentric behavior and confident that the crew were now ready to support him, took matters into his own hands.

Captain Trico was in midrant, screaming the names of his gods, when the blaster bolt bored through his brain. An offer of unconditional surrender followed two minutes later.

The turbolift came to a halt, doors rolled open, and the Rebels stepped out into the corridor. Kyle took two steps and stopped. Jan bumped into him. She was about to say something when she saw why.

More than a hundred Imperial fighters had attacked the *Hope*. but this was the only one that had penetrated the bulkhead. The ship's solar panels had been ripped off, but the nose jutted into the passageway. The pilot, still visible within, sat slumped at his controls. His visor had been

raised, and Jan saw he was little more than a boy, just one of the hundreds who had died during the twelve-hour battle.

The voice came from beside her. It belonged to a rating in a smoke-stained uniform. He held a fusion cutter in his hand and was part of a damage-control party.

"Weird, huh? We took a torp in that same spot, it blew a hole through the hull, and the fighter plugged it five minutes later. All we had to do was fill the gaps with emergency sealer- pressurize the passageway —and presto! A perfect patch! Something to tell the kids about."

Jan nodded politely thought about the grandchildren the Imperial pilot would never have, and followed Kyle down the corridor. She had killed men like the pilot, a lot of them, and wished it would end.

Kyle was forced to duck under temporary cable runs, squeeze around repair crews, and give way to high-priority repair droids. The air stank of ozone, sealer, and smoke. In spite of the fact that the Dreadnaught had taken a beating, the agent was struck by the friendly grins, nods, and waves from those he passed. They had taken losses, painful losses, but emerged victorious. The story would grow in the telling and live long after they were gone.

The sentries stationed in front of Mon Mothma's day cabin checked credentials and, much to Kyle's surprise, permitted him to retain both his sidearm and lightsaber. An indication of trust that he, unlike those who accompanied him, had never been accorded before.

Jan knew what he was thinking and winked. Kyle grinned in response. Jan, more than anyone he had ever known, could read his mind. Their hands touched, and Luke, who was last to pass through the door, couldn't help but smile. These two had been made for each other ... and he hoped they would live long enough to pursue the possibilities.

The compartment had been designed to accom-modate the needs of admirals with largely ceremonial duties. That being the case, it was huge. In spite of the fact that the ship had been through a complete overhaul the year before, there were scant resources to squander on decor. The

hangings, many of which were hundreds of years old, seemed badly out of place. Especially given the current occupant's unostentatious style.

Mon Mothma, whom Kyle had met before, came forward to greet him. "Kyle ... it's good to see you again. Jan . . . how are you? You know Leia . . . Have you met Han Solo?"

Jan hadn't, although she had certainly heard of him, and shook hands. Luke hugged Leia and turned toward Kyle. "Kyle, I would like to introduce my sister, Leia Organa Solo, and Han Solo."

Kyle shook hands and tried to ignore the fact that they were famous. Both looked the way he felt: tired and more than a little haggard. Mon Mothma called the meeting to order. "I know everyone could use some sleep, so let's get on with it. Han, I assume Leia briefed you on this, but don't hesitate to ask questions.

"Kyle, Luke tells me that you not only confirmed that the Valley of the Jedi exists, you managed to obtain the coordinates for it. Congratulations! The Alliance owes you yet another debt of gratitude."

Kyle remembered the nearly fatal trip down into the depths of Nar Shaddaa, the looting of his father's farm, the duel with the Dark Jedi Yun, the confrontation with the droid 8t88, the battle with Gorc and Pic, and the rather unpleasant place from which the coordinates had eventually been retrieved. The fact that Mon Mothma could summarize the whole thing in a single sentence amazed him. Still, from her point of view, it was results that counted.

He shrugged. "Thanks, but Jan deserves at least half the credit."

Blood colored Jan's cheeks, and Mon Mothma smiled. "As a matter of fact it was Jan, with a significant amount of help from Leia and Luke, who convinced me to turn you loose on the problem, or didn't you know that?"

Kyle wasn't aware of that, although he might have guessed, since Mon Mothma had traditionally been suspicious of his motives. It was his turn to blush, and it

was Han who responded. "Don't let it bother you, kid ... they don't trust me either!"

Everyone laughed including Mon Mothma. "So, Kyle, we know where the Valley is located. Now what?"

Kyle had anticipated the moment and prepared his speech. "A battle was fought on the planet Ruusan more than a thousand years ago. A battle fought between two armies of Jedi. Somehow," and here the agent looked at Luke, "and no one is sure how, the power represented by these armies became trapped within a Valley.

"A Dark Jedi named Jerec stole the coordinates from my father's farm and has no doubt made use of them. If he can tap the power invested there, if he can control it, we will witness the birth of an Empire that will make this one seem enlightened by comparison."

"Yes," Mon Mothma said impatiently, "we're aware of the threat. What do you think we should do about it?"

Kyle wasn't so sure that Han knew all the facts . . . but decided to let the comment pass. "I propose to go there, with Jan if she's willing, and find a way to stop him. We did it on Danuta . . . and we can do it again."

Mon Mothma considered the mission to Danuta. It had been a long shot, but the agents had located the Death Star plans and brought them out. An accomplishment that, when combined with information secured by others, enabled the Rebels to win the Battle of Yavin. The twosome had been lucky, very lucky, and the odds were against them being that lucky again.

"I admire your bravery, Kyle, not to mention your dedication to the Rebel cause, but the odds are stacked against you. You can bet that Jerec has a Super Star Destroyer, who knows how many support vessels, and plenty of troops. No, what we need is a fully equipped Battle Group."

"A nice thought," Leia said gently, "but where would it come from? We're stretched thin as it is."

"True," Mon Mothma acknowledged thoughtfully, "but consider the alternative. How would Kyle and Jan make

their way past the picket ships? And even if they did, what would they do on the surface? Very little is known about the planet, but one thing is for sure: There's no civilian population in which to hide."

Luke had a distant almost dreamy expression. It was he who broke the ensuing silence. "Everything Mon Mothma says is true ... but truth has many levels. The power that Jerec seeks to control flows from spirits trapped within the Valley ... spirits who must be freed. If Kyle freed the spirits, the threat would disappear. All without the use of a Battle Group. Easy? No, but there is a flow to such things, a flow with power of its own." The Jedi eyed those around him.

"I am told there is a species of sentients on Ruusan, a species with a long history, much of which has been captured in something they refer to as the poem of ages. There are numerous prophecies toward the end of the poem, including one that reads, 'And a knight shall come, a battle will be fought, and the prisoners go free.' They believe that it refers to the Valley, and I agree."

Kyle had heard those words before, but he still felt a chill run down his spine and wondered if he should feel proud or very, very frightened. The second possibility seemed more logical.

Mon Mothma sighed. Yes, she knew that there was more to life than what she could hear, touch, taste, feel, and see. She knew that certain individuals, Luke being an excellent example, had what might be described as additional senses. But knowing it, and being comfortable with it, were two different things. She preferred direct access to relevant data where important decisions were concerned, and this decision was extremely important. Still, if Luke said something was so, it generally was.

She forced a smile. "Okay, given the problems mentioned earlier, how would Kyle and Jan reach the planet's surface?"

Han cleared his throat. His voice was hoarse after more than twelve hours of giving orders. "While it's true that the picket ships would stop one of our vessels, an Imperial ship would make it through."



Kyle was quick to seize on the idea. "Han is right! We could stow the *Crow* on one of the captured transports, deliver some supplies, and slip away . . . It's perfect!"

"Not so fast," Mon Mothma said cautiously. "Give the Imperials some credit. The transport would be challenged and, lacking: the proper recognition codes, searched."

"True," Jan put in, "but every commanding officer wants all the supplies he or she can lay their hands on, especially where munitions are concerned. If a transport drops out of hyperspace and offers them a load of proton torpedoes, the Imperials will jump on it. Especially if the ship and crew seem legit."

Mon Mothma raised an eyebrow. "Proton torpedoes? How about field rations instead?"

"Some field rations are just as lethal," Han said jokingly, "but I understand your concern. How 'bout some special torpedoes? The kind that explode in the launch tube?"

"Exactly what I had in mind," Jan agreed. "Is it settled then?"

Mon Mothma looked around the table and saw each head nod in turn. She added her approval to all the rest. "One last question. Who's going to crew the transport? And even more importantly, who will command it?"

"I volunteer to command," Han responded quickly. "This could be fun."

"And time consuming," Mon Mothma added cautiously. "We can't afford to let you go right now."

Leia, conscious that she was more than a little biased, nodded in agreement. Han looked in her direction but chose to remain silent.

"I'll find some volunteers," Jan put in. "Folks with Special Ops experience."

"Fine," Mon Mothma said, glad to delegate at least one task to someone else. "Final comments?"

"Just one," Kyle responded soberly. "Wish us luck. I have a feeling we're gonna need it."

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sunlight rippled across a sea of shimmering glass. Glass that had once been part of iridescent domes, towering minarets, soaring archways, vertical towers, and all the other structures that constitute a city. A city reduced to a sea of manmade lava, as Imperial laser cannon carved swathes of destruction through the once-beautiful metropolis.

The resulting slag was thicker where buildings had been clustered and thinner out toward the suburbs, where the military base had been established.

The past could still be seen, on a hill where a nearly translucent temple glittered with emerald beauty, on a rise where a half-melted statue stretched a hand toward the heavens, and out on the silicone plain where isolated dwellings remained untouched.

Prisoner 272-20-136 released the T-shaped handle-bars and waited for the impact hammer to fall silent. Then, careful of what he was doing, the man took air deep into his lungs and pulled the mask away from his face. Milagro had a thin atmosphere, which was why he and the other prisoners were allowed to work without leg irons. There was nowhere to go, not without air.

The prisoner wiped his forehead with a rag, allowed elastic bands to pull the mask against his face, and checked the seal. The air left a coppery taste in his mouth. The comm set was part of the head gear- and the factory-issued voice was part of his life.

"That was an unauthorized break, Unit 136. Twenty-seven

seconds will be deducted from your next rest period."

The prisoner looked back over his shoulder and saw that a detainment droid had approached from behind. It looked like a floating garbage can and had a personality to match. "My name is Obota- Alfonso Obota. Al to my friends."

"No," the droid replied unemotionally, "that's who you used to be and may become again. At this particular moment you are Unit 136 —and the most likely member of my crew to be disciplined. Please return to work."

Obota started to object and thought better of it. He had enough trouble without making more. The prisoner took the handlebars and made the hammer dance. The comm mast required six anchors, each sunk into the subsurface strata and fused in place. His task was to drill down through a three-meter-thick mantle of fused glass.

The drill rattled dully, the noise muffled by the thin atmosphere. Glass projectiles peppered the lower part of Obota's legs. They stung, but he knew better than to stop. The hole was a little more than one meter deep when the voice boomed into his ears. "They want you in the admin hut, Unit 136 . . . on the double."

Surprised, but happy to get off work, Obota started to jog. Everything the prisoners did was carried out "on the double." Failure to comply would almost certainly result in punishments that the nearly identical detainment droids dispensed with machine-like consistency.

The base hadn't existed three months before and consisted of sixty-three prefab buildings. It was a sprawling affair that included a landing strip, repair facility, surface-to-air missile batteries, barracks, and a military detention facility.

Normally busy, the place seemed even busier in the aftermath of the battle, as ground personnel struggled to service battle-scarred starfighters, a somber-looking burial party made their way toward a row of recently excavated graves, and an infantry company marched the width of a lavender parade ground.

Building twenty-three served as headquarters for the

Military Correction Facility, or MCF. It, like the structures on either side, had an external air lock, inflatable walls, and a protective berm.

Obota waited for the lock to open, shared the chamber with an admin droid, and cycled through. The interior was standard-issue puke green. A long list of things you weren't supposed to do scrolled across a reader-board, and the floor, which some other prisoners had buffed to a high gloss, stretched left and right.

The droid, who had privileges the human didn't, chose the hall to the right. The machine's foot cleats made a squeaking noise and left black skid marks on the other-wise immaculate floor. Obota removed his mask, attached it to his belt, and approached the fiberboard door. The sign read:

*MCF 63*

*HONOR THROUGH DISCIPLINE*

*Knock before you enter.*

Obota knocked three times, shouted "Prisoner 272-20-136 reporting as ordered, sir!" and waited for a reply.

"Enter."

Obota opened the door, stepped through, and crashed to attention. A weary-looking officer nodded, consulted his datapad, and looked up again.

"Take a left in the hall . . . fourth door on the right. Move it."

Obota yearned to ask "why" but knew better than to do so. "Sir! Yes, sir!"

Obota did a smart about-face, passed through the door, and marched down the hall. The officer watched the door close, wondered what the cloak-and-dagger types wanted with the poor slob, and returned to his work.

Obota marched down the hall, located the proper office, and discovered it was empty. "Hurry up and wait." A phrase that could have served as the real motto for the MCF.

There were chairs, and Obota felt the strong urge to sit in one of them but knew it was against the rules. Rules enforced by holo cams mounted high in each corner of the room. That being the case, the prisoner went to parade rest,

chose a spot on the perfectly blank wall, and forced himself to stare at it.

A minute passed, followed by five, followed by ten more. Had they forgotten him? Obota was just about to conclude that they had when he heard voices and felt the fiber foam deck vibrate under his boots. He came to attention as the tech sergeant and two civilians entered the office. Not because they rated the courtesy, but because prisoners honored everyone.

Obota decided to ignore the tech sergeant and focus his attention on the civilians. They were the ones who had summoned him- or so he assumed- and they were the ones to worry about. Why had he been summoned? What did they want? There was no way to tell. Both wore nondescript flight suits and neutral expressions. And what was that hanging at the man's side? A lightsaber? Now that was unusual.

The sergeant nodded in Obota's direction. "There he is . . . anything else you need from me?"

The woman shook her head. "No, sergeant, we'll take it from here."

The noncom nodded, left the room, and closed the door behind him.

The woman consulted a handheld datapad, looked up, and met Obota's gaze. "My name is Jan Ors. This is Kyle Katarn. You are Alfonso Luiz Obota, service number 272-20-136, originally from the Adegas System. You graduated fourth in your class from the Merchant Academy, qualified as third officer on a freighter, and resigned to join the Alliance. That was more than a year ago. You accepted a commission as second lieutenant, became the second officer on a Special Operations transport named the *Pride of Aridus*, and led a mutiny six standard months later. True so far?"

Obota remembered Captain Nord's face, the beads of sweat that dotted his forehead, and the way his hands shook. The *Aridus*, now bearing the name *Spirit of Solaris*, had made ground fall and, under the cover of discharging a

completely legitimate cargo, had landed a Special Ops team. They'd been gone for six hours and two minutes, two minutes longer than the insertion plan called for, and Nord wanted to lift. Lift and leave twelve men and women stranded on a planet swarming with Imperial troops.

Obota forced his mind to the present. "Ma'am! Yes, ma'am!"

Jan nodded thoughtfully. "The transcript from your court martial says that you refused a legal order, confined your commanding officer to his cabin, and seized control of the ship. True?"

Obota remembered the explosion that moment-arily turned night to day. The sound of sirens and the comm call as the Commandos raced for the ship. He remembered Nord screaming at the crew shouting, "Lift! Lift! Lift!" and his fist connecting with the older officer's chin. It was all a matter of record, captured on the control room recorders and witnessed by the bridge crew.

"Ma'am! Yes, ma'am!"

Kyle watched the emotions play across the prisoner's face. He himself was a renegade, a deserter with a price on his head, and could imagine how Obota felt. The conflict between the oath he had sworn and what he knew to be right. Or was it more complicated than that? Captain Nord claimed his second officer had been insubordinate from the start. A self-serving lie? Or a statement of fact?

Jan looked up from her datapad.

"The records say that while three of the commandos made it to the Aridus and were successfully extracted, TIE fighters attacked your transport above the atmosphere. Five of your fellow crew members were killed during the battle. The ship suffered serious damage and barely made it to hyperspace. Three lives for five ... a rather poor trade, wouldn't you say?"

Obota remembered the fear, carnage, and smoke. He saw the faces of those who had died, knew they might have lived if he had obeyed orders, and wished he had died in their places. "Ma'am! Yes, ma'am!"

"So," Jan said quietly, "knowing how the whole thing turned out, would you make the same decision again?"

"Ma'am! Yes, ma'am!"

"Why?"

Obota knew the answer- had lain awake countless nights thinking about it- but hesitated. Who were these people? They were covert operations types, that much was obvious, but doing what? And for whom? Knowing would give him an edge, but he didn't know and had no way to find out. That being the case, he settled on the truth. "Because it seemed like the right thing to do."

There was silence for a moment. Jan looked at Kyle and the Jedi considered Obota's words. No complicated excuses, no fancy rationalizations, no self-serving explanations.

He smiled. "At ease, Lieutenant Obota, we need an experienced deck officer, and you fit the bill."

The *High Hauler* dropped out of hyperspace and probed the out-of-the-way solar system for ships.

There were plenty to find, including a screen of picket ships, a long black Star Destroyer, numerous escorts, and an alarming number of TIE fighters. Most were centered around the fourth planet from the sun.

Obota, a newly restored lieutenant, but packing the honorary title of "captain," felt something heavy hit the bottom of his stomach. Yes, he'd been expecting to find an Imperial Battle Group and would have been disappointed if he hadn't, but the sight of all those blips on the detector screens still scared the heck out of him.

The challenge was nearly instantaneous. "This is the Imperial Star Destroyer *Vengeance* ... identify yourself or be fired on."

"Fighters closing fast, sir," a tech interjected. "An escort frigate broke orbit and is coming for a look-see."

Obota checked the Imperial uniform to ensure that the closures were properly snapped, adjusted the bandage that encircled his head, and scanned the bridge. The bridge crew wore grimy uniforms, blood-stained bandages, and care-

fully applied makeup. They looked exhausted.

Even the untrained eye would see the makeshift hull patch, the dangling cables, and the fire-blackened control console and know what they meant: The *High Hauler* had been in a fight.

A warrant officer, who bore a striking resemblance to Kyle Katarn, intercepted Obota's glance and gave a cheerful thumbs-up. The deck officer winked, turned toward the holo pickup, and touched a button. "The *Vengeance*? This is Lieutenant Hortu Agar, engineering officer for the Imperial Transport *High Hauler*. I assumed command when Captain Drax and the majority of the bridge crew were killed."

The holo swirled, and a real captain appeared. He had narrow-set eyes, a beaklike nose, and a slash-shaped mouth. "Listen carefully, lieutenant whoever-you-are . . . I want recognition codes and I want them now."

Would the Destroyer actually fire on them? Obota had pooh-poohed the idea earlier, but had started to wonder. The desperation in his voice was real. "I don't know the codes, sir! They're issued on a need-to-know basis, and engineering officers aren't cleared to receive them! We were on a run to Byss when the Rebels jumped us. We fought, but it was no use. The bridge took a direct hit. So, given the fact that we're carrying a full load of proton torpedoes, I thought . . ."

"Did you say 'proton torpedoes'?" the Imperial inquired.

"Why, yes," Obota replied innocently, "two hundred and fifty proton torpedoes to be exact, straight from the factories in the Corporate Sector. That's why . . ."

"Enough," the officer commanded. "A boarding party will inspect your ship, and, assuming that the facts match your story, emergency repairs will be made. You and your crew performed well, lieutenant, and the Empire knows how to show its gratitude."

Obota tried to look modest. "Thank you, sir."

"One more thing," the officer added.

"Sir?"

"What sort of condition is your docking bay in?"



"Fully functional, sir."

"Excellent. We can use those torpedoes . . . Have your crew prepare them for transshipment. A shuttle will take them off."

Obota nodded obediently. "Sir! Yes, sir!"

The Imperial said, "That will be all," and the holo snapped to black.

Obota touched a button, checked to ensure that the comm was truly off, and turned to applause. "A sterling performance," Kyle said admiringly.

"Couldn't have been better," Jan said as she emerged from the shadows. "You missed a career on the stage."

"Thank you," Obota said, bowing from the waist. "But that was little more than the first act. The second act is about to begin, and the audience is on its way."

More than an hour passed between the time the *High Hauler* left hyperspace and the assault shuttle entered the transport's launch bay. The crew, who had already been through more than twenty simulated boardings off Milagro, were in their places. They had counterfeit IDs, family bolo stats, ticket stubs, miscellaneous receipts, and all the other junk people keep in their wallets.

All were human because nonhumans were a rarity on Imperial military vessels, and, with the exception of Jan Ors, all were male, since very few women had been allowed to serve in the Empire's armed forces.

A ship's complement that was supposed to number twenty-five had been reduced to twelve, a number intended to reflect heavy casualties as well as the fact that it had been a long time since the Empire's navy had enjoyed the luxury of full crews.

Yes, Obota thought to himself, details are important. Did we think of everything? The next hour will tell.

Hatches closed and the bay was pressurized as the assault shuttle settled onto the repulsor-blackened deck. Obota waited for the green light, heard the klaxon sound, and

opened the lock. Air hissed as pressures equalized. The Rebel slipped through the opening, spotted the officer in charge, and hurried to greet him.

"Lieutenant! Are we ever glad to see you! Welcome aboard."

The lieutenant, who saw the entire thing as something of a lark, smiled and shook hands. "Looks like you've been through a lot . . . sorry about the formalities."

Jan watched the interchange from the *Crow's* darkened cockpit and fiddled with a jury-rigged comm set. Obota and the lieutenant were getting along just fine . . . but how about the rest of the boarding party?

Their faces were hidden behind armor and visors. The only way to know what they were saying was to monitor their conversations . . . and that's where the comm set came in.

The inspection was cursory at best and lasted about forty-five minutes. After a quick tour of the bridge, a stroll through the engineering spaces, and a glimpse at the recently patched holes, the boarding party had returned to where they started.

The Imperial was a talkative sort, eager to trade gossip and brag about his trips to Ruusan's surface. And Obota, who knew that such information could come in handy, listened carefully. The two were thick as thieves by the time they passed out through the lock.

The bay was pressurized, so Obota accompanied the lieutenant all the way to the assault shuttle and was already congratulating himself on a job well done when the other officer noticed the *Crow*. He pointed, and Jan, who was watching via the ship's holo cams, felt her blood run cold.

The Imperial turned to Obota. "What in the world is that thing?"

They had anticipated the question of course, but Obota had expected to hear it earlier and was thrown off balance. He struggled to recover. "Not much to look at, is she? We lost our shuttle about three months back, the captain requested a new one, and that's what they gave us."

The lieutenant nodded sympathetically. "Everything is in short supply, which is why the CO is so happy to get his hands on those torpedoes. The Group has half the ordnance it's entitled to, which would hurt during a full-scale battle. Blast! I should take a look, but it's such a nuisance."

Kyle, alerted by Jan and still disguised as a warrant officer, burst onto the deck. "The lighter is alongside, sir! They're ready to land."

The bay was too small to accommodate three vessels all at once, so something had to give. Obota half expected the lieutenant to proceed with his inspection anyway and was relieved when he didn't.

"Thanks, captain. I've seen enough. Hope we meet again sometime, and here's wishing you a safe trip home."

Obota couldn't help but like the other man. He shook the lieutenant's hand and entered the lock.

Kyle did likewise.

Jan watched the proceedings, gave a sigh of relief, and wished it was over. But no sooner had the air been pumped out of the bay, and the shuttle allowed to depart, than a box-shaped lighter took its place.

The lighter carried two humans and twelve load lifters. The droids didn't require any oxygen, and it was a straight shot to the holds, so Obota left the bay open to space. This had the meritorious effect of speeding the process along while simultaneously isolating the pilots.

The lighter made three trips before the last torpedo had been removed from the transport's holds and it was cleared for departure. The moment the Imperial vessel was gone, Obota signaled his intention to carry out what repairs he could and dispatched the *Crow* on a series of errands. There were parts to pick up, rations to secure, and a "training" mission that allowed the agents to pass over Ruusan's northern hemisphere.

Such activities entailed some risk, but they provided the Rebels with an excellent opportunity to familiarize themselves with the Imperial operation and established the *Crow* within the overall pattern of the Battle Group's

comings and goings. The landing, and all that followed, came sixteen hours later. Having received the necessary clearances, the *High Hauler* separated from the Imperial Battle Group and prepared for hyperspace. No one paid much attention to the evolution since it qualified as both routine and boring.

And while the fleet operations officer did make note of the fact that the transport passed through a Class I security zone on its way through the upper reaches of Ruusan's atmosphere, he wrote it off to the commanding officer's lack of experience. Some things are best ignored . . . or so it seemed to him.

Nonetheless, it was during that brief moment when the freighter swept past the planet that the *Moldy Crow* left the security of the larger ship's launch bay and plummeted through the stratosphere. Jan had the controls. She scanned the instrument panel, waited till they were well inside the atmosphere, and fired the drives.

"So far, so good."

Kyle nodded. "Yeah, but it won't take them long to make us. We need a place to hide."

"True," the other agent agreed, "but let's check the settlement first . . . the one the lieutenant spoke of."

"Fort Nowhere?"

"Exactly. We could use a guide, someone who knows the surface, and that's the logical place to look."

"Good idea," Kyle agreed, "but quickly, before they sic a wing of TIE fighters on us."

Jan nodded and pushed the ship down through a thin layer of clouds.

Wee Gee, the utility droid Kyle's father had designed and the two of them had built, peered over their shoulders. The machine could assume a nearly endless variety of configurations but most often resembled an inverted U. His right arm was the most powerful. It incorporated four articulated joints and a C-shaped grasper. The left was less massive but mounted a human-style tool hand. A repulsor-lift engine enabled Wee Gee to hover just off the deck.

The droid made a series of beeping sounds. Kyle nodded his head. "That's right, boy. Ruusan looks a lot different from Sulon."

Wee Gee made a chirruping sound and clamped himself to a bulkhead.

Concerned that they might be detected, Kyle scanned the full spectrum of comm channels. There was some routine chatter, bursts of static as computers exchanged high-speed data packets, and something else, something so weak, so intermittent he wasn't sure it was intentional. Except that it felt intentional, and if the Jedi had learned anything over the last few months, it was to trust his feelings.

The ship shuddered as Jan leveled out over an undulating desert and followed the terrain as it rose and fell. If they stayed low enough, if they were lucky, the agents would escape detection by ground-based sensors.

"Listen to this," Kyle said, turning up the volume. "Does it mean anything to you?"

Jan listened to what sounded like a series of clicks. Some came in rapid succession, while others had short periods of silence between them. "No, but it's repetitive, which would seem to rule out natural phenomena of some sort."

"That's what I thought," Kyle agreed. "Let's try something..." He touched some keys, ran the signal through the ship's computer, and waited for a response. A screen came to life, and words appeared and scrolled from top to bottom.

"The signal in question exhibits a ninety-nine-percent match with a primitive code involving two alternating symbols. Specific combinations of these symbols stand in for letters, just as binary notation provides a symbolic representation of words and numbers."

Kyle felt a sense of excitement, demanded a translation, and watched the text appear. "Land fifty-six kilometers due south of Fort Nowhere."

The agent checked to see if there was more, found there wasn't, and pointed to the screen. "Look!

There they are!"

"There who are?" Jan asked cynically. "The colonists? Or a company of stormtroopers?"

Kyle shrugged. "Anything's possible . . . but it feels right."

Jan brought the *Crow* up, cleared a mountain of sand, and watched Kyle from the corner of her eye.

She hadn't planned to fall in love with him, or anyone else for that matter, but it had happened and she was stuck with it. Stuck with him and his talent. It was as if he had a whole set of additional senses, senses she didn't have.

Jan felt a hand cover hers, turned to meet Kyle's gaze, and saw him smile. "Are you all right?"

The agent thought about it for a second, realized that she was, and gave a nod. "Yes, as long as I have you."

Kyle squeezed her hand. "As if you could get rid of me—Watch that ridge!"

Jan threw the *Crow* to the right, guided the ship through a U-shaped gap, and both of them laughed.

Kyle had noticed that the signal grew steadily stronger as they approached Fort Nowhere. Then, just as the *Crow* flew over some badly burned ruins, the indicator bar shot upward.

"Let's take another look," Kyle suggested, pointing back over his shoulder. "There could be survivors."

Jan nodded, put the ship into a tight turn, and dumped speed. The settlement, or what was left of it, made a sad sight indeed. There was very little left except for burned-out buildings, tumble-down walls, and blackened earth. A single gra grazed next to the abandoned fort.

Kyle gave a low whistle. "Look at that! Not a building left standing . . . why?"

Jan knew the question was rhetorical and didn't answer. The Imperials had been out to eradicate the settlers or, failing that, to make sure they were reduced to little more than hunter-gatherers.

"All right," Kyle said, "I don't sense any intelligent life forms around here . . . let's try the landing zone."

Jan, who still wondered about the wisdom of such a move, turned toward the south. It took less than fifteen minutes to

reach their destination. It consisted of a flood plain located between two ancient riverbeds. One thing was for sure, there was very little chance of an ambush, since there was nowhere to hide.

Jan banked to starboard. "It looks like nobody's home. What now?"

"Looks can be deceiving," Kyle replied. "Somebody's watching. I can feel it."

Jan frowned. "Somebody good? Or somebody bad?"

Kyle shrugged. "Sorry, I can't tell. Let's put her down, keep the weapons systems on-line, and see what happens."

Jan sighed, wished there was another way, and followed Kyle's suggestion. The *Crow* swooped in, hovered for a moment, and settled onto alluvial gravel. Jan left the weapons systems on, set the controls for a hot start, and slaved the sensors to a handheld remote.

It was then and only then that the agent followed her companion outside. He knelt next to the ship and allowed gravel to sift through his fingers. Metal pinged as it cooled, and a breeze swept in from the north.

Jan drew the sweet, unrecycled air deep into her lungs. "Nice, isn't it?"

Kyle encountered something solid with his fingers, brushed the gravel away, and broke the object free. "Hey! Look at this!"

He held up the object for her inspection, and Jan saw what remained of an ancient dagger. The handle, which might have been made of wood or bone, had decayed hundreds of years before, but the blade was good as new.

Then, as if sensitized by Kyle's find, her eye fastened onto something protruding from the plain. The Rebel walked over, toed the object with her boot, and felt it give.

She bent over, found a grip, and pulled it free. "Look, Kyle! A helmet!"

Kyle stood and moved in her direction. "It looks like we stumbled onto an ancient battlefield... I wonder who won?"

The question went unanswered as something whirled over the agent's head. Jan's blaster was halfway out of its

holster when Kyle grabbed her arm.

"No! Let them look."

The device completed a circuit of the ship and returned. It was shaped like a boomerang and equipped with sensors. Jan had never seen anything quite like it, which seemed to suggest the colonists rather than the Imperials. The machine hovered, as if to examine them, turned, and entered the *Crow*.

Wee Gee had remained aboard and Kyle could imagine the machines examining each other. His thoughts turned to the flyer's owners. "Cautious, aren't they?"

Jan nodded. "And with good reason."

The flyer, if that's what the device could properly be called, exited the ship, circled over their heads, and darted toward the west. It returned seconds later, ran through the same sequence again, and accelerated away.

"They want us to follow," Kyle said. "Let's crank it up."

The Rebels reentered the ship, checked their sensors, and lifted off. The remote hovered, zipped out in front of them, and sped away. The boomerang-shaped machine made pretty good time for something its size, but it was difficult to maintain visual contact and to fly that slowly. Jan was relieved when the device lost altitude and prepared to land.

Kyle watched a pair of low-lying hills reach up to embrace them and used his recently developed talent to monitor the Force. It was like an enormous lake, calm for the most part, but responsive to the least disturbance. There were sentients up ahead, a number of them. Were they colonists? Survivors from the attack on Fort Nowhere? Or storm-troopers waiting in ambush? Logic suggested the former, his emotions the latter.

Grit Grawley lay on top of one of two hills that guarded the entrance to the Valley and the ruins beyond. The statue that had occupied the platform off to his left had fallen hundreds of years before. The remains of it were scattered down the forward slope and pointed toward a skillfully sculpted hand. The palm was blackened where signal fires had



burned, beckoning travelers from many kilometers away. It must have been something to see.

Carole touched his arm. "Grit! Look! Here they come."

The colonist looked, grabbed his electrobinoculars, and looked again. It was a ship sure enough, with Fido in the lead. He grinned. There was no telling who the visitors were, but one thing was for sure, the ship was clean. He had monitored the inspection himself.

"What do you think?" Carole inquired. "Are they Rebels?"

Grif tracked the ship as it passed and descended toward the ground. "That's a good question, hon. You saw the video. Did you recognize the man?"

"No, I don't think so . . ."

"Well, I could be wrong, but he looked kinda familiar. A lot like Morgan Katarn's boy ... the one who left Sulon for the Imperial Military Academy. Question is, am I right? And if I am, what side is he on? Time to find out."

The courtyard was large enough to accommodate a squadron of X-wings. Jan chose a spot between the once-spectacular fountain and the broad flight of stairs that led up and into the temple. A group of humans, all armed, monitored her progress.

The *Crow* landed with a solid thump. The Rebels assigned Wee Gee to keep watch and made their way down the ramp and out into the increasingly warm atmosphere. A man with a three-day growth of beard came forward, gave his name as Grif Grawley, and pumped Kyle's hand.

"Howdy, son, how's your dad?"

Kyle peered into the other man's face, realized who it was, and grinned.

"Citizen Grawley? Is that you? This is wonderful! How's your wife?"

"I'm fine," Carole said, stepping forward. "Thanks to your father . . . We were in trouble back on Sulon and he brought us here."

Grif cleared his throat. "Which raises an interesting question, son. We know which side your dad's on, but

you're something of a mystery. Drop the blaster and the lightsaber. That goes for you too, young lady . . . till we sort things out."

The agents looked around, saw more than a dozen weapons pointed in their direction, and did as they were told.

"That's better," Grif said equably. "Now, where were we? Oh, yeah, how's your father?"

"Dead," Kyle answered bitterly. "Remember the spaceport? Well, that's where they displayed his head. On a spike for all to see. That's why I'm here, to avenge his death, but more than that, to stop the Imperials from looting the Valley of the Jedi."

Carole Grawley's hand came up to her mouth, and her husband scowled. Morgan Katarn? Dead? It might be a lie . . . but Grif didn't think so. He swore, turned to a group of bystanders, and gave some orders.

"Lasko, Kimber, Pardy, throw some netting over that ship and clear the plaza. The Imps aren't blind, you know ... Come on, you two. Let's take it in out of the sun. Cold in the morning and warm later on, that's how it is around here."

The Rebels felt naked without their weapons and more than a little nervous with so many blasters pointed in their direction. Grif led them up the stairs and through an enormous entryway. The temple's interior was surprisingly well lit thanks to an ancient system of skylights and mirrors. A dozen shafts of light, each arriving from a different angle, converged on the likeness of a man. He leaned forward, his chin supported by a fist.

Grif gestured to the space around him. "Welcome to our temporary home. Those fortunate enough to survive the attack on Fort Nowhere banded together, collected what resources they could, and came here."

Carole Grawley listened with amazement as her normally tactless husband papered over the fact that the "townies," as he liked to call them, had ignored his warnings, taken terrible losses, and fled into the badlands. An area about which they knew very little. She would never forget the day

they had arrived, setting off the perimeter alarms and interrupting her husband's mid-afternoon nap.

The fact that Grif had agreed to help them, and subsequently metamorphosed into their leader, was no less than a miracle. Or so it seemed to her.

Oblivious to his wife's thoughts, Grif pointed toward a makeshift table and the equipment piled beyond. "Take a load off and tell us the story. Most things happen at night around here . . . so we have plenty of time."

Kyle took a seat and tried to ignore the onlookers. He told the story of how he had gone to the Academy, received the news of his father's death, and headed for home. It was during the journey that he met Jan for the second time, learned that his father had been murdered by the Empire, and swore himself to the Rebel cause.

The raid on Danuta didn't seem relevant, so he left that out and went straight to events on Sulon. These were of considerable interest to most of those present, since that's where most of them came from and, in many cases, hoped to return.

Kyle described his battles with Yun, Gorc, Pic, and 8t88 in dry, dispassionate terms, explained how Jan and he had recovered the necessary coordinates, and why they had come.

A settler named Lasko, the same one who had been brought to his knees by Sariss, listened with interest. Could the Jedi in Katarn's story be the same ones who destroyed Fort Nowhere? It certainly sounded that way.

Jan felt it was a story well told, but at least one of those present disagreed. He was a pugnacious individual with an underthrust jaw and massive shoulders. His name was Pardy, Luther Pardy, and he wore Kyle's weapons as if they were his.

"It makes a nice story, boy, a real nice story, kind o' like the fairy tales the missus tells the young'uns. Why should we believe this dreck? 'Specially the stuff about the Force, Jedi Knights, and all that. Sounds kind o' convenient to me, sort of like what a spy would say."

Lasko eyed both men, decided to support Katarn if it came to that, and allowed a hand to rest on his blaster.

A cloud passed in front of the sun. The light level dropped by twenty percent. The statue seemed to frown, and all eyes turned toward Kyle. Slowly, so as not to startle one of the trigger-happy colonists, he stood.

Pardy, who outweighed the agent by a good thirty pounds, grinned. A quick, easy victory would raise his status within the group. Make Grawley listen more. He licked his lips.

Kyle met the other man's eyes, extended his hand as if ready to shake, and visualized what he wanted. An object whirled through the air, slapped the surface of his palm, and made a popping noise.

Energy sizzled as the lightsaber came to life, and Pardy stepped back. A half-dozen blasters came up but fell when Grif shook his head. "Well, Pardy, no more questions? I didn't think so. Guess you'd better return that blaster. Welcome to Ruusan, kid, and you too, Jan. Tell us about that Valley and what we can do to help."

Lasko felt a tremendous sense of relief. Only a Jedi could defeat a Jedi. Now there was hope.

There was no especially safe time to move around the planet's surface, but night offered some protection and was the only time when the bouncers ventured out. It had been Grif's idea to meet with the locals and seek their counsel. After all, the bouncers were either native to Ruusan or had been there so long that it didn't make much difference, and they knew the planet better than anyone. Grif nudged the agent's arm.

The two of them, plus Jan and six of the most able-bodied colonists, had taken refuge in a fortress of stone. A boulder lay at the center of the refuge, surrounded by the tumble of smaller rocks to which it had inadvertently given birth. Carved from their parent's flanks by the combined forces of heat, water, and cold, the offspring provided a vantage point from which the Rebels could watch the surrounding plain.

Ruusan had no less than three moons, all of which were visible. Grif pointed to the flat area in front of them. "That's where the bouncers are most likely to appear . . . They're shaped like balls, have retractable tentacles, and rely on the wind for propulsion. All of which might explain their lifestyle, patience, and inherent fatalism."

Kyle raised an eyebrow, and Grif looked self-conscious. "Hey, it makes sense, doesn't it? You don't need no degree in anthropology to figure that out."

"It makes a lot of sense. Go on."

"Well, they have big eyes, for gathering light, and love to roll in front of the wind. That's when they look for obstacles, steer for them, and bounce into the air."

"Hence the name 'bouncers,'" Kyle put in.

"Right," Grif confirmed. "And that's when they float as far as the wind will carry them."

"They sound wonderful," Jan said wistfully. "I hope they come."

"There's no way to be sure," the colonist replied, "but the conditions are right. Your father knew them," Grif added, turning toward Kyle. "And they still talk about him, or write about him, since that's how they commun-icate."

"The bouncers knew my father?" Kyle asked incredulously. "How could that be?"

"Your dad was an interesting man," the settler replied. "Once he put us on the ground and got things organized, he borrowed a skimmer and took off. Everybody said he was crazy. Who knows when he ran into the bouncers, but he did. They call him 'the knight who never was,' whatever that means."

Kyle felt goose bumps ripple the length of his arms. His father could have been a Jedi Knight ... and chose not to. That was his theory anyway, which echoed what the bouncers said. But how could they know?

"Look!" Jan said excitedly. "I see some white blobs!"

"Here they come," Grif confirmed, peering through his electrobinoculars. "Watch closely . . . you're in for a treat."

The creatures sent ripples through the Force. Kyle had

raised his electrobinoculars and was about to take a look when another presence registered on his consciousness.

The agent turned, scrambled onto a flat-topped rock, and scanned the southern horizon. It took less than five seconds to acquire the incoming targets and identify them for what they were: a skimmer with two speeder bikes as escorts.

"Grif! Jan! We've got company. Alert the others."

"What about the bouncers?" Jan demanded. "We've got to warn them!"

Kyle turned, realized the globes were much closer than they had been, and watched them bounce high into the air. His mind was racing, trying to come up with a solution, when the speeder bikes opened fire.

Smaller and therefore faster than the heavily laden skimmer, they split the rock pile between them, turned, and went in opposite directions. One toward the west and one toward the east. The light generated by their energy cannon split the night into geometric shapes and was lost in the distance. The bouncers reacted by turning inward.

"They're clustering together," Grit called out, "so the troopers on the skimmer can slaughter them!"

"Not tonight they won't," Jan said grimly, "not while I'm alive."

The agent took her blast rifle, scrambled up onto an even higher perch, and wrapped the sling around her elbow. Kyle considered trying to stop her and knew it was useless. Jan was going to war in spite of the fact that a fire fight was likely to reveal their presence and threaten an already perilous mission. All for some aliens she hadn't even met. Mon Mothma would never approve.

Still, Kyle loved her for it and turned to Grit. "If your people want to even the score, here's their chance. Prisoners are fine... but nobody gets away... nobody."

Jan wanted to take full advantage of surprise. That meant that each of the first shots had to count. She peered into the scope, led the speeder bike by what she judged to be the right distance, and touched the trigger.

Coherent energy burped outward, the Imperial ran into it,

and the bike exploded. Still-flaming debris rained down as the surviving rider fired into the rocks and called for help. The officer in charge of the patrol, a Lieutenant Aagon, saw the explosion, knew his stormtroopers would be less vulnerable on the ground, and ordered the helmsman to land. The troopers bailed out, Aagon followed, and they ran for the rocks. It was a short sprint and easily done.

The officer knew the Rebs were on the opposite side of the rocks and wanted to keep them there. His helmsman, a sergeant named Forley, and the gunner, a rating named Leeno, were still aboard. Aagon spoke into his comm.

"Take the skimmer around to the other side of the rocks. Pin down the Rebels. We'll attack from behind."

The dead biker had been Forley's best friend. He planned to do more than pin down the Rebs, he planned to kill them. "Sir! Yes, sir!"

Confident of Forley's competence, Aagon led six troopers into the rocky maze. He could have called for reinforcements, but had some good reasons not to.

The first related to the fact that his authorized patrol area lay ten clicks to the south. A nice enough collection of ravines and gullies but not the sort of place the bouncers were likely to go, which meant the hunting was poor.

The second reason had to do with his immediate superior, an ambitious sort who would just as soon take all the credit and let Aagon do all the fighting.

No, the lieutenant decided, we'll kill the Rebels, report the engagement as taking place twelve clicks to the south, and score some points in the next dispatch. Just the thing to fuel his next promotion.

Confident that his plan would work and eager to get on with it, the officer scrambled over a boulder and slipped through a gap. The troopers followed.

The skimmer rounded the rocks and, with support from the remaining bike, opened fire. There were lots of places to hide, so the attack had very little effect. But Forley knew a thing or two and changed his tactics. He ordered Leeno to concentrate his fire on a single boulder. The gunner did so,

watched the rock start to glow, and was soon rewarded with an explosion.

Kyle ducked as razor-sharp rock fragments flew in every direction, took one Rebel's arm off, and exploded as they hit the surrounding boulders. The man started to scream then stopped as another piece of shrapnel hit him in the head.

Kyle scuttled over to Jan. "Give me a two-minute lead and take them out."

Jan nodded grimly and wasn't the least bit disturbed when Kyle took most of the Rebel force with him. He had led stormtroopers into battle himself, and successfully, too.

A teenage girl had been left to watch Jan's back. The girl's name was Portia. She had dark skin, white teeth, and intelligent eyes. The agent took a potshot at the speeder bike, gestured to the girl, and followed her through the rocks.

Light flashed behind them. The women paused and looked back. Another rock had started to glow, so they ducked behind a ledge. Jan eyed the teenager's weapon. It appeared to be clean and well cared for. The rock exploded, fragments rattled off the surrounding surfaces, and the Rebels ignored them. "So, Portia, are you any good with that thing?"

"One of the best," the teenager answered confidently. "That's what they tell me anyway."

"Good," Jan answered tightly, "because we're about to bet my life on it."

Trooper RW957 was where he liked to be, at the tail end of the column, bringing up the rear. A position where he was less likely to be killed in an ambush, sent forward on some suicidal mission, or accidentally shot in the back. Yes, sir, RW957 thought to himself, you've gotta have a plan if you want to survive, and not just one plan, but a whole lotta plans, that's why ..

The only warning was the whisper of fabric. An arm slid around the trooper's neck, a hand pulled off his helmet, and moonlight reflected off the blade. The trooper thought the word "help" but never had an opportunity to say it.



Jan climbed up onto a carefully chosen rock, lit the flare, and waved it in the air. The trooper on the speeder bike took the bait, turned toward the target, and fired his braking jets. "A steady platform makes for an accurate shot. . . ." That's what the manual said, and the manual was right.

Portia forced herself to wait until the target was square into her sight, squeezed the trigger just the way you were supposed to, and held it down. The first few bolts were deflected by the dull-white armor, but the fourth managed to scorch it, and the fifth, sixth, and seventh drilled on through. The trooper fell out of his saddle, the bike began to drift, and Jan threw the flare as far as she could.

Aagon heard the rock explosions, saw the flare go off, and wondered what the Rebs were up to. The officer felt for a handhold, found what he was looking for, and pulled himself up. The top of the rock was flat and sloped toward the north. Something moved, and he raised his blaster. That's when a finger poked his shoulder. "I wouldn't do that if I were you ... drop it."

The Imperial was in the process of turning, of trying to kill the man behind him, when he heard something "pop." He blinked as a bar of incandescent light appeared, grew momentarily smaller, and flashed down toward his face. There was time for one last thought, something profound would have been nice, but nothing came. The light was the brightest thing Aagon had ever seen.

The skimmer had fired countless bolts of energy and all to no avail. It hovered as Forley struggled to make a decision, not something the Imperial command structure trained sergeants to do. Both bike riders were dead, and he couldn't raise the lieutenant. The whole thing should be over by now. What to do? Stay? Or run? Neither alternative seemed very attractive. The skimmer made a highly visible target, but running entailed problems of its own. What if Aagon and the rest of the squad were alive? And how would he explain where they'd been? The whole thing was a mess.

Leeno interrupted Forley's thoughts. "Sarge! Behind you!"

Forley turned, realized that a large white globe had

drifted to within centimeters of his face, and threw up his hands. The bouncer used its tentacles to grab hold of them, pulled itself in, and enveloped the sergeant's head.

Horried, Leeno swiveled his weapon toward the stern and opened fire. The bouncer died, but so did Forley; which caused the Imperial to panic. He jumped over the side and ran. The gunner was still running when the bouncers drifted down out of the sky; knocked him to his knees, and pinned him down.

Grif, along with a couple of Rebels, arrived two minutes later. Leeno, his mind filled with images of the way Forley had died, continued to scream.

The three sisters had fled the sky, the stars were barely visible, and a jagged pink line marked the eastern horizon. Hours had passed while the Rebels buried the dead, camouflaged the graves, and loaded weapons and other gear onto the Imperial skimmer.

"A nice piece of equipment," Grif said, patting a sturdy flank. "We can use it."

"And the speeder bike," Jan put in, "not to mention the other stuff."

"Some of which may still be out there," Kyle said, remembering how difficult it had been to search in the dark. "I hope the wrong people don't find it."

Grif shrugged. "What are the odds? Besides, we've gotta get out of here before the sun comes up and the search begins."

The words made sense. Kyle turned toward the delegation of bouncers. Their skin fluttered as they leaned into the oncoming breeze and used their tentacles as anchors.

One of the band, an individual Grif referred to as "Floater," had agreed to serve as a guide. He moved among his peers and touched each one of them good-bye. Their leader, an especially leathery specimen who had met Morgan Katarn during his visit to the planet, watched as Kyle scratched words into the hardpan with a combat knife.

"You and your people must hide . . . will you be all right?"

The tentacle felt dry and warm where it touched the

agent's hand, slid downward, and took control of the knife. The syntax was strange but understand-able. "Blowing wind steady. All right will be."

Kyle accepted the knife and carved a reply. "I am sorry about the death of your friend-mate. Thank you for allowing Floater to help us."

"Sorry are we at the death of your race-person," the bouncer replied. "Floater goes where he must, though death it may bring."

Kyle thought about Jerrec, about those who served him, and felt an emptiness at the pit of his stomach. He took the knife. "You know what we came to do . . . will we succeed?"

The bouncer blinked. The blade grated on tiny bits of rock as it carved words into the soil.

"Everyone knows that a knight shall come, that a battle will be fought, and the prisoners will go free. If not now, then someday."

The answer was far from satisfying, and the words echoed long after the wind had erased them.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Yun had kicked the covers off his bunk. They lay bunched on the deck. His limbs twitched in reaction to the horror of what he was about to do. The rain splashed onto the already saturated ground.

A layer of what looked like mist or ectoplasm hovered over the well-churned mud. Twenty men and women knelt before an open grave. They were guilty of something, he couldn't remember what.

A few prisoners had tears streaming down their cheeks, others snarled their defiance, but most bore no expressions at all. They simply stared into the trench and awaited their fates.

Yun hefted the lightsaber over his head, felt it grow heavier, and realized it had been transformed into an old-fashioned sword. The curved blade had a razor-sharp edge. That's when the Jedi remembered that he had dreamed this dream many times before. He struggled to wake himself, was unable to do so, and knew what would happen.

For perhaps the thousandth time, the face of Nij Por Ral, a portly professor of linguistics looked up at him and begged for mercy. "Please! I beg of you, spare us!"

One aspect of Yun's personality felt no particular animosity toward the man and wanted to grant his request, but another part, the shadow that dwelt within, hungered for status and recognition. Status and recognition that could and would be granted by Jerec and Sariss if he lived up to their expectations.

Gleaming steel began its downward course. Yun regretted the blow even as it fell. Not because of the injury it would cause, but because it was flawed, and everyone would know it. He winced as the blade sank into Por- Ral's shoulder. Metal grated on bone as the linguist bellowed in pain and Yun struggled to pull his weapon free. Finally, having wiggled the sword back and forth, the sword came loose. Sick with shame, the Jedi put an end to the prisoner's anguished screams.

But the horror wasn't over, not by a long shot. Yun moved down the row. His mother, father, and sister knelt before him. They beseeched him with their eyes, but to no avail. He had already cut them down, if not with steel, then with words. But no matter how many times he killed them, they always came back.

The blade rose and fell. Heads rolled, tumbled into the ditch, and were followed by the bodies to which they belonged. The rain, combined with the blood of his victims, had soaked through the Jedi's clothes. He shivered, struggled to raise the sword, and was surprised by its weight. It was heavy; too heavy, as if each life had somehow added to its mass...

Light flooded the compartment, and Yun jerked in response. The Jedi rolled off the bed, activated his lightsaber, and rose ready to fight. Boc, who stood in the hatch, laughed mockingly.

"What's the matter, boy? A little nervous, are we? Well, pull yourself together. It seems Jerec has need of your scrawny presence."

Yun took a step forward, lightsaber in hand, but the other Jedi laughed. "Save your energy, boy, it's my guess you're going to need it."

The already spartan cabin looked even more bare as Jerec placed the last of his meager belongings into the case. While the Jedi had no interest in quanti, he was choosy about the possessions he had and didn't like others to touch them.

There was a knock at the door. The way each person

interacted with the Force was unique, and this disturbance was typical of Yun. A promising student, but filled with self-doubt. Ah well, Jerec thought to himself, a bit of seasoning will fix that. "Enter."

Yun entered cautiously, wondered what the older Jedi had in store for him, and hoped the Master was in a good mood. Jerec nodded to acknowledge Yun's presence. "Thank you for coming . . . I need your assistance."

Jerec needed his help! The younger Jedi felt his heart swell to at least twice its normal size. He couldn't wait to tell Sariss. "Yes, my lord, how can I help?"

"Phase two of the survey is now complete. The tower is in the final stages of construction. That being the case, the real work can begin. I leave for the surface in an hour."

Yun nodded. "Yes, my lord."

"Have you studied the survey results?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And the key findings were?"

"A large valley; filled with thousands of Jedi graves, and invested with their power."

"And?"

Yun shrugged. "And satellite caves, some empty, some filled with potentially valuable artifacts."

"Potentially valuable artifacts," Jerec emphasized, closing the valise. "Just the thing to help defray the cost of this fleet and keep the Imperial nitpickers off my back. Blast, but they're stupid! The entire universe spread before them and they see none of it. Still, they are what they are, and we must accept that. Loot, that's what they want, and loot they shall have. Thanks to you."

Yun felt his heart sink. Loot? Junk was more like it, interesting junk but junk nevertheless. Especially when compared to the main chamber and the unimaginable power available there. But thinking such thoughts and expressing them were two different things.

Yun swallowed his disappointment. "Yes, my lord. How should I proceed?"

Jerec turned his empty sockets in Yun's direction.

"Accompany me to the surface, locate an officer named Vig, and assume command. The work proceeds slowly- too slowly- and I want you to correct that."

Yun sensed a trap, gathered his courage, and asked the obvious question. "I've met Major Vig. He seems capable enough . . . so what's the problem?"

Jerec smiled. "More than a thousand Jedi spirits are trapped within the Valley's walls and our efforts stirred them up. Some of the prisoners have taken to howling through corridors, scaring stormtroopers, and creating havoc. The major is beside himself."

Yun cursed his luck. Babysitting spirits and stormtroopers . . . a low-level assignment. Why not Maw? Or Boc? Because Maw was unpredictable and Boc too cunning. And Sariss? No, Jerec had other more important duties for his second in command to carry out.

Yun sighed. "Yes, my lord. I'll pack and join you in the launch bay."

Jerec waited for the hatch to close, felt the younger Jedi's energy start to fade, and smiled. Even the best of blades should be tested.

Yun packed quickly and headed toward the launch bay. He rarely had the chance to spend time with the Master, and he tried to make the most of every opportunity, no matter how brief.

The two men ran into each other in the main corridor and walked shoulder to shoulder toward the launch bay. Stormtroopers jumped to get out of the way, officers came to attention, while Yun basked in the reflected glory. It was at moments like this that his doubts disappeared and the price seemed worth paying.

The shuttle was waiting, the bay door opened, and a pair of TIE fighters escorted them down. The trip to the surface was uneventful, for which Yun was thankful. Jerec had many unpleasant qualities, but there were exceptions. He could be very charming when he chose to be. The Master regaled Yun with amusing stories, the younger Jedi laughed in all the right places, and the trip was soon over. Jerec

made a point of saying good-bye, and the resulting sense of significance followed Yun all the way to his quarters.

The alarm buzzed and wouldn't stop. Yun reached for the bedside console and discovered that the room's recently installed heating module was on the blink. The Jedi was still in bed when a droid entered the room, announced itself in loud, cheery tones, and placed a tray on the table.

"Good morning, sir. Here's your breakfast . . . Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yeah, pump some heat in here," Yun growled as he rolled out of bed. "It's freezing."

"Of course, sir, right away; sir," the droid said, making for the door. "I'll send a maintenance droid."

Yun slipped into the fresher and treated himself to a hot, steamy shower. After that, it was a simple matter to slip into some fresh clothes, consume his lukewarm breakfast, and head for work. A storm-trooper had been assigned to guide him and stood at the tower's base.

"Good morning, sir. Major Vig sent me . . . I'll lead the way."

The stormtrooper set off, and Yun followed. The ground in front of the tower was crisscrossed with tread marks, supplies sat piled on floater pallets, and security was tight. Even more noticeable, to him at least, was the way the place felt.

Each Jedi perceived the Force in his or her own slightly subjective manner. For Yun, it manifested as an eternal hum- a gentle vibration that never went away. But this place was different. The Force felt more intense here, as if it had been amplified, and growled like a ravenous beast. In fact, the activity was so strong it could be perceived by those with little or no talent.

They had just entered a ravine and started down a flight of water-eroded stairs, when a banshee-like entity screamed by the stormtrooper's head.

The soldier flinched, managed to retain his composure, and turned toward Yun. "They're starting early today, sir. Looks like a rough one."



Given the fact that the Force was more concentrated than usual, Yun found that it was easy to shape a thought and hurl it at the obnoxious spirit. The results were dramatic, to say the least. Angered rather than frightened, the entity summoned even more spirits to the site and sent them howling around the Jedi's head. The trooper, his mind reeling under the assault, broke and ran.

Yun, relying on his training, stood his ground. A voice spoke within his head. "Pain means nothing to such as these. They have suffered for thousands of years. Imagine their plight, understand the horror of it, and communicate that understanding."

The personality associated with the voice seemed familiar somehow, and the Jedi struggled to place it. "Who are you?" Yun demanded. "One of them?"

"No, not really," the voice answered. "I gave you the key . . . try it."

Knowing that both Jerec and Sariss expected him to succeed, not to mention the troopers in the chamber below, Yun followed the instructions. He thought about the spirits who wailed around him, about the extent to which they had suffered, and his anger melted away. He felt a sense of empathy, of understanding, and extended it to those around him.

The change was almost instantaneous. The moaning stopped, the entities slipped away, and the Force grew more tranquil. Pleased with the results and confident of his ability to deal with similar situations, Yun sent a message of appreciation.

There was no answer from his invisible benefactor, just a momentary sense of warmth.

The stormtrooper had yet to reappear, but Yun had no difficulty following the path downward, past a wall inscribed with ancient hieroglyphics and a spot where a deactivated droid stared into a looted alcove. One of the machine's arms had been converted to a directional sign. Yun took a right.

The side corridor was relatively short and opened into a

large chamber. Stand-mounted floods threw light onto the walls, cargo modules stood in untidy piles, and a confrontation was underway. Major Vig was a big man, with short red hair and a handlebar mustache. It was nonreg, and a constant source of frustration to his superiors, but ultimately tolerated because of his courage and almost legendary competence. Competence that translated to respect, and explained why the stormtroopers were hesitant to ignore both his orders and the blaster in his hand.

The officer's voice boomed through the cavern. "Hold it right there . . . the first man to move dies."

There was a moment of silence while the troopers absorbed the officer's words and considered the consequences of what they were about to do. That's when a group of three screamers entered the chamber through the rear wall, passed through the middle of a trooper's chest, and dove through the floor.

It was too much. Eyes bulged in their sockets, heads swiveled in every direction, and the mob moved forward. That's when Yun spoke. "Good morning, gentlemen. I see you're already hard at work! Lord Jerec will be pleased. Sorry about the somewhat unusual working conditions.. perhaps I can help."

In spite of the fact that very few of the soldiers had ever seen Jerec, much less met him, they were well aware of who he was and the much exaggerated powers ascribed not only to him, but to the coterie of Jedi who attended him. That being the case, the sudden and unheralded appearance of one such exalted creature took on seemingly mystical qualities. The upshot was that when Yun said he could help, the troopers believed him.

Sensing the change, and correctly interpreting the embarrassed looks that had appeared on his subordinates' faces, Major Vig holstered his side arm. He started to say something, realized Yun was distracted, and waited for the Jedi to take notice. It didn't take very long. Yun completed his interaction with some unseen spirits and smiled.

"I think the matter is resolved for the moment anyway. Inform your men that while such incidents will no doubt continue, I'll be here to deal with them. That means they can return to work. Lord Jerrec has a personal interest in this effort, and there's no time to waste."

Major Vig spoke to his officers, who soon had the troops back at work. Most of his peers would have pressed charges on the theory that a few highly visible executions were a boon to discipline, but Vig didn't blame the troops for being frightened and decided to ignore what they had done. A strategy Yun found interesting.

Sariss, like her mentor, had taught Yun that the sort of leadership Vig demonstrated was a sign of weakness and that respect flows from fear. Fear born of power, which was the point of the entire exercise on Ruusan.

The major interrupted his thoughts. "Thank you, sir. The screamers have been a constant problem."

Yun shrugged. "Glad I could help. In fact, it looks as if you're stuck with me."

Vig's mustache twitched over what might have been a smile. He knew Yun would be in command but saw that as a plus. The Jedi was welcome to the screamers and Jerrec, as far as the officer was concerned. "Welcome aboard, sir. Would you like a tour?"

Yun indicated that he would and followed the officer across the main chamber and into one of the many storerooms that branched off from it. The narration had a canned quality suggesting that Vig had given the tour before.

"The main chamber is a natural phenomenon, formed by an ancient river, but the storerooms, while still very old, are a good deal more recent. They were carved from solid rock." The officer paused and pointed at a wall. "Look, you can still see the tool marks."

Yun looked, confirmed Vig's observation, and followed the officer into a half-empty room. A droid was hard at work stripping goo off a wall. "Looks weird, doesn't it?" the officer inquired. "Still, the ancients knew what they were

doing. They brought down supplies, stacked them along the walls, and sprayed preservative on them. Interestingly enough, the scaler is so much better than what we use for the same purpose that it might be worth duplicating. Here, look at this..."

Vig sidestepped the droid, took one of the recently freed packages, and placed it in the Jedi's hands. Yun accepted the object, peeled the last bits of malleable gel off the bottom of the box, and turned it over. It was made of plastic or something very similar. The top featured a single cluster of hieroglyphics and a slightly raised panel.

"What is it?"

"Press the panel three times," the officer said mischievously. "Place it on the floor and watch."

Yun did as instructed and stepped back. Ten seconds passed before anything happened. Then, just as the Jedi was about to lose interest, the lid popped open, steam billowed into the room, and a yeasty odor filled the air.

"Lunch!" Vig said delightedly, "or breakfast or dinner as the case may be. Look inside."

The Jedi looked. The box contained fifteen or twenty grub-like things. They wiggled and squirmed with such vigor that the thick, brown sauce lapped the edges of the container.

"We aren't sure which species these meals were prepared for," the officer continued, "and it doesn't really matter. Self-heating rations have been around for a long time, but not ones in which the seemingly inert contents are somehow brought back to life. And what about the heat source? The heat mods in our field rations have a shelf life of about twenty years. These have been sitting around for a thousand or more."

Yun saw the value and understood the means by which Jerec had secured a small fleet with which to pursue his personal ambitions. It was wonderful or horrible, depending on how you chose to view it.

"And that's not all," Vig continued. "Come on . . . wait till you see the rest!"

The Jedi followed the officer into a succession of store-

rooms where even more treasures were revealed. There was a tractor beam projector no bigger than a wand, healing machines only slightly less effective than bacta tanks, and a fusion reactor so small it could be carried in a backpack. All of which would endear Jerec to his corporate sponsors. A political dynamic that Yun had never considered before.

It was a relatively pleasant morning, interrupted by no more than three screamers, none of whom presented much of a problem.

Yun had lunch with Major Vig, a captain, and two lieutenants in a recently cleared storeroom. They sat at a table complete with white linen, regimental silver, and a freshly prepared meal. A droid served as waiter. Everything went well until the plates were cleared and the atmosphere inexplicably changed.

The first sign that something was wrong was when Lieutenant Hab said something unintelligible, grabbed his throat, and toppled over backward.

A split second passed while the Jedi wondered if Hab had choked on a piece of meat, followed by the realization that the problem was even more serious. Yun struggled to remain calm, fought the temptation to meet force with force, and attempted to reach out.

The entity sensed the movement and released Hab in order to refocus its energies. The spirit seized the tendril of being that linked Yun to his physical body. The Jedi felt a tug, followed by sustained pressure. The entity was trying to pull him out!

The Jedi attempted to withdraw and discovered that he wasn't able to do so. The other entity's hold was too strong. Fear clutched his belly, his mouth opened, and nothing emerged.

It was at the very height of his fear that the voice spoke within. "Don't surrender to doubt, my son. Use the same technique you learned earlier. He's stronger, that's all. Even Jedi Masters can lose their sanity after a thousand years of confinement. Anchor your mind, reach out, and understand.

The Force will protect you."

Yun swallowed, was glad to discover that he had that much control, and took the risk. Rather than continue his efforts to withdraw, he pushed outward. The entity sensed victory and rushed in. Yun welcomed the spirit, not into his body, but into the warmth of his understanding and the hope of freedom.

The ancient was too far gone to be healed, not by a mind so junior, but allowed itself to be soothed. "Good," the voice said. "You did all anyone could do. He returns to his tomb."

"Who are you?" Yun demanded. "Should I know you?"

"Yes," the voice replied calmly. "You should. For you participated in my murder, and I inhabit your dreams."

"Nij Por Ral?"

"No, though my death followed his."

"Rahn!"

Yun remembered him well. A Jedi who had heard of the Valley and dedicated his life to finding it. Rahn and a group of his associates had been intercepted before they could locate the Valley, and it was Yun's participation in the murders that followed, mixed with other aspects of his life, that still haunted his dreams.

The voice was matter-of-fact. "So, you remember."

"Yes."

"Good."

"Why? Why help me?"

"The light within you flickers," the voice answered calmly, "but it continues to burn. The fate of billions upon billions of beings rests on what will happen here. You will play a part."

"A part?" Yun asked, "What kind of part?"

"That," Rahn responded, "is entirely up to you."

Yun felt the connection break, opened his eyes to a room filled with staring faces, and felt very much alone.

Yun wandered the subterranean passageways for the next couple of days, dealt with the occasional screamer, and wished something interesting would happen. It wasn't long before his wish came true.

The Jedi had just left the main corridor, sidestepped a train of heavily laden gray pallets, and was about to enter the third chamber when everything started to shake. Little bits of rock rained down on his head, the dust made him cough, and the floor shook as something heavy hit it. The screams started just as the shaking stopped.

The Jedi could have headed for the surface and knew it was the smart thing to do, but he discovered that his feet had minds of their own. They carried Yun into the chamber and a scene of mass pandemonium.

A large, pancake-shaped section of the ceiling had collapsed, trapping a man beneath. His name was Jaru, and he was known for three things: the size of his nose, the fact that he could spit farther than anyone else in his unit, and his skill with a grenade launcher. Jaru was alive because he had been bending over at the moment when the roof caved in and a nearby cargo module had absorbed the initial impact.

Though half-crushed, it still served to hold the slab aloft. The trooper's hoots extended out into the chamber and beat a tattoo on the floor.

Orders were shouted, bodies moved through the dusty murk, and troopers grabbed hold. Two droids, both designed for heavy-duty construction work, followed the humans into position. An officer counted to three, muscles strained, eyes bulged, and hydraulics whined, but nothing happened. That's when the next set of tremors hit.

Large chunks of rock fell, a helmet shattered, and a trooper fell. He was dead before he hit the ground. Jaru moaned and continued to kick his legs.

"Grab his ankles," Yun ordered, "and get ready to pull."

If Imperial troops had been taught to understand anything, it was blind obedience. The officer gave a quick series of orders, and men leaped to obey and took Jaru by the ankles.

Once the stormtroopers were in position, Yun closed his eyes, called upon the Force, and "saw" the slab rise into the air. It was a truly desperate measure, since he had never

moved anything even a quarter of that size during his apprenticeship or in the years since. But he couldn't leave Jaru lying there, couldn't leave him to die.

Beads of perspiration dotted the Jedi's forehead, fingernails bit into the palms of his hands, and his lips formed a grimace. Light flared beyond his eyelids, energy crackled, and something moved.

The stormtroopers cheered. Yun opened his eyes, caught a glimpse of the slab floating a meter off the ground, and suddenly lost his concentration. The rock hit the floor with an enormous thump, cracked down the center, and split into pieces.

Yun, certain that Jaru had been killed, felt a horrible sense of despair. That's when the officer slapped him on the back, Jaru materialized between a couple of troopers, and the whole thing was over.

They loaded Jaru onto a makeshift stretcher and carried him toward the surface. The rest of the work party followed. The tremors were gone now, and it was then, while he followed the officer up some well-worn steps, that Yun realized what he'd done.

"Yes," Rahn confirmed. "When the chips were down, you forgot about the dark side, yet the power you needed was there. Think about it."

Yun did think about it. Long into the night. There were dreams, but none focused on death, and a smile found his lips.

The administrative deck was only a few levels above the surface. That made it easier for the ground troops to come and go. The office was rather Spartan and likely to remain that way. Unpacked boxes were stacked against an unfinished wall, an unfinished cable run dangled through an access panel, and the air smelled of scaler.

Sariss regarded Yun across the top of her somewhat cluttered desk. He looked the same but felt different, although the nature of the change escaped her. She had heard about the rock-raising incident, everyone had, and



read the officer's report. Even Yun admitted that the whole thing had been an anomaly, a near miracle that he wouldn't be able to replicate. The episode still pointed to an extremely strong talent, however, one that might prove superior to her own one day, a possibility that had never crossed her mind before. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps Yun had gained additional confidence and was starting to show it. A not-altogether-pleasant possibility within a highly competitive meritocracy.

Sariss summoned a smile and forced it onto her lips. "You've done well . . . even Jerec agrees."

Yun looked pleased. "Thank you."

Sariss chuckled. "Better wait till you hear what I'm about to say, you could change your mind."

Yun raised an eyebrow. "A new assignment? Something worse than herding screamers around? It hardly seems possible."

"Oh, but it is," Sariss assured him cheerfully. "It seems that a patrol," she glanced at her data pad, "Zulu, Able, Mary 341 to be exact, is forty-two hours overdue."

"Comm contact?"

"None."

"Aerial search?"

"Four aircraft, low altitude, standard pattern. No luck."

"Probe droids?"

"Dispatched . . . but nothing so far."

Yun was silent for a moment. "Why me?"

Sariss shrugged. "Why not? The sun will do you good. Besides, this requires some brains. An entire patrol disappeared without a trace. Why? Jerec wants to know."

"What about the screamers?"

"I'll put Boc on it."

Yun smiled. "Count me in."

Sariss grinned. "I thought you'd like that."

Yun could have requested a skimmer, crawler, or even an assault shuttle but had opted for an AT-ST and an AT-AT instead. Partly because the machines made excellent

platforms from which to observe the surrounding countryside, partly because they had enough firepower to level anything he was likely to encounter, and partly because he liked the lumbering machines. Not just the way they looked, like slab-sided monsters, but the sense of power they conveyed. He rode in the two-man, seven-meter-tall Scout Walker, while the larger and more heavily loaded machine brought up the rear.

The AT-ST's pilot was a second lieutenant by the name of Momo. He preferred "Mad Dog Momo" but had been unable to plant the nickname among the troops. Perhaps because of his choirboy face, a rather engaging grin, and the fact that he had never fired a shot in anger. Momo brought the walker up out of the ravine and onto the hard-packed plain. He looked at the control panel and over to the Jedi.

"This is it, sir. The eastern boundary of their patrol area."

Yun nodded. "Take a break, lieutenant. I'm going up top."

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

A servo whined, the top hatch folded open, and Yun climbed the bulkhead-mounted rungs. It was hot outside, especially after the air-conditioned interior, and he squinted into the light. The Jedi emerged just in time to see the AT-AT lurch to a stop and pause a respectful distance away. The monster's head swiveled as its pilot used the chin-mounted sensors to probe the surrounding rocks.

Yun removed the electrobinoculars from the pouch on his belt, turned his back to the transport, and looked toward the north. He didn't see any tracks, nor was he likely to, since the patrol had been mounted on a skimmer plus two speeder bikes. He lowered his glasses. So what to do? The authorized patrol area had been searched from the air- and now on the ground. If the vehicles- or the remains of the vehicles- were visible, someone would have seen them by now.

So what about the areas outside of Lieutenant Aagon's authorized patrol area? Where would they have gone, and why? Yun had a theory about that, a theory based on his tour of the missing men's quarters. Every single one of

Aagon's troopers had trophies hanging over their bunks. Sphere-shaped organisms with large, light-gathering eyes and delicate-looking tentacles.

No one seemed to know where the trophies came from or how the stormtroopers happened to acquire them, but Yun could guess. It was boring out on patrol, and Aagon, a resourceful type by all accounts, had discovered a way to liven things up. In doing so, he had routinely left the area he was assigned to patrol and gone where? South into the badlands? West toward the tower and his superior officers? East toward the saw-toothed mountain range? No, none seemed very likely not given the nice smooth hardpan that stretched to the north and natives who were rumored to roam it.

His decision made, Yun returned the electrobinoculars to their pouch, descended the ladder, and issued a new set of orders. The walkers turned toward the north, increased their rate of speed, and continued the hunt.

Kyle marveled at how pretty Jan was. Her eyes were closed, so that the long, dark lashes came close to touching her cheeks, one of which was smudged with dirt. One hand rested on her blaster, the other lay palm up, seemingly defenseless. He knew better, of course, and was careful not to touch her.

"Hey, Jan, time to wake up."

"Wha?" Jan opened her eyes, blinked, and rubbed them with her fists. She looked at her wrist chrono. "What's the deal? I thought we agreed to sleep in for a change?"

"A nice thought," Kyle agreed, "except that Fido spotted an Imperial patrol. An AT-ST and an AT-AT, both headed north."

Jan rolled out from under the covers, grabbed her pants, and pulled them on. Kyle grinned, and she stuck out her tongue. "Lecher."

"Only for you . . ."

"Good," Jan said, buckling the blaster rig around her waist, "because I'd sure hate to fill out a whole bunch of reports

explaining your untimely death."

Kyle tried to look terrified and followed her out of the one-time armory and into the main part of the temple.

Grif Grawley was waiting. "The skimmer's ready. Let's go."

Kyle nodded. "You think they're headed here? That we'll have to lead them away?"

Grif shrugged. "Hard to say. I hope not . . . but better that than to have them find the temple and the *Crow*."

"How 'bout Floater? Should we bring him along?"

The colonist shook his head. "Naw, the daylight is too hard on him. Besides, Floater ain't built for this kinda thing."

The agents agreed, followed the colonist to the recently liberated skimmer, and took off. It was afternoon, so the occasional butte cast long, dark shadows toward the east. Grawley made use of them whenever he could, darting from one to the next, doing everything he could to maintain a low profile.

Finally, after fifteen minutes or so, the colonist dropped the skimmer into a dry riverbed and followed it toward a dramatic-looking mesa. "There's a good hiding place near the base," he explained, "And a trail to the top. We'll have a good view from there and, assuming they stay on the same course, plenty of time to react, if necessary."

Jan was tempted to ask what options they'd have if Imperials didn't maintain their present course but managed to hold her tongue.

True to his word, Grif guided the landspeeder into a semicircle of rocks, shut down the engines, and grabbed his pack. The agents did likewise. None of them planned to stay, but it paid to be careful.

Much of the trail was natural, following as it did an ancient fault line where the forces of sun, wind, and rain had carved the softer material away to reveal the underlying sedimentary rock. Still, there was no escaping the fact that intelligent, tool-using beings had improved on what nature started by cutting ledges into otherwise sheer cliffs, demolishing dangerous overhangs, and creating

turnouts when the path grew narrow. Who were these mysterious engineers? Like so much about Ruusan, there was no way to know.

It took the better part of a half hour to reach the top and Kyle was out of breath. Grif, by contrast, seemed entirely unaffected a fact the younger man found annoying. "Come on," the colonist urged, "let's head for the east side. We oughta be able to see them by now. I sent Fido home, so he won't be spotted."

The surface of the mesa was flat. and littered with loose rock and a few hardy plants. The remains of broken-down walls marked the outline of an ancient fortress. One of these ran fairly close to the edge, and Grif motioned for the agents to take cover behind it. They obeyed, produced their electrobinoculars, and peered toward the east. The sun was just about to set, but Kyle had no difficulty recognizing the boulder and the smaller rocks that attended it. This was the place where the battle had been fought and the dead lay buried.

"Look!" Jan said, pointing to the southeast.

Kyle turned, saw something blur through the viewfinder, and brought the device back. There was no mistaking the walkers or their destination. Kyle lowered his glasses. What had attracted them to this particular location? Chance? Or something more? Whatever it was, he didn't like it. What if the Imperials found something? Security was tight as it was - additional precautions could make an already difficult mission nearly impossible. He met Jan's gaze, knew what she was thinking, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Time will tell, Jan . . . time will tell."

The walkers came to a halt just south of the rock pile. The AT-ST stood guard while the massive AT-AT knelt to disgorge a pair of crawlers and a company of stormtroopers. Corporal Niko Smith cleared the ramp, sprinted for some cover, and fell on his belly. His sergeant, a grizzled veteran named Zonka, glanced over his shoulder, saw who it was, and nodded.

"Gee, Sarge, it seems like we've scrambled over every boulder, rock, and pebble between here and the tower. What's the deal?"

"About a hundred credits a week and the Empire's heartfelt gratitude," Zonka replied. "Now get your butt in gear."

Smith grinned, waved his fire team forward, and scrambled over the rocks.

Yun opened the top hatch and watched while the troops fanned out, advanced by squad, and entered the jumble of stone. It was just another pile of rock to them, a chore to be dealt with as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Not to him, though. No, this place was different somehow. A battle had been fought here . . . and people had died. But when? A week ago? A thousand years? There was no way to be sure.

The sun dropped below the mesa off to his left. It looked blacker than black against a backdrop of gloriously pink light. And there was something else, too, a nearly undetectable fluctuation in the Force, the kind that signaled one or more intelligent minds.

Not too surprising, since some of the colonists had survived the attack on Fort Nowhere, except that Yun knew at least one of the minds, or thought he did.

The man in question was an Imperial renegade, the son of the very Rebel leader who had discovered the Valley of the Jedi and subsequently been executed. He was a Jedi who had been considerably weaker then, but still strong enough to fight Yun to a standstill and then spare his life. An act which the Dark Jedi had found puzzling and initially interpreted as a sign of weakness.

The discovery sent thoughts whirling through Yun's mind. A Rebel Jedi, here on Ruusan, why? To stop Jerec, of course, to free the imprisoned spirits, to counter all that Yun had dedicated himself to. It was an amazing discovery, and the Jedi had just started to think about it when Lieutenant Momo tugged on his pant leg.

Yun descended into the cockpit. "Yes?"

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but the ground pounders found something."

"What?"

"A helmet, sir, with RW957 written on the inside."

Yun checked his datapad. Trooper RW957 had been a member of the missing patrol all right, which seemed to confirm his thesis: The patrol crossed out of its assigned area, ran into some opposition, and lost the subsequent fight. That, combined with the fact that the Rebels had one or more agents on the ground, led to an obvious conclusion. A conclusion that Yun decided to keep to himself.

"It's getting dark. Pull back the troops, establish a defensive perimeter, and hold for morning. We'll complete the search then."

Vlorno nodded. "Sir! Yes, sir!"

Yun climbed up through the hatch and stared out toward the mesa. The other mind was there, all right, still watching, still waiting. Yun considered his options and was surprised to discover that he had some.

The obvious course was to report everything he knew, attempt to capture the Rebels, and acquire more status. More status, more respect, and more opportunities to kill people. And what of the screamers? The whole process of thinking about them as personalities, of empathizing with their plight, had changed the way he felt about them. Jerec planned to keep them in confinement, to use their power for his own dark ends. And what about the uncounted billions upon whom his heavy hand would fall?

Yun knew that he lacked the courage to champion their cause directly, but what if there was another way? What if all he had to do was ignore something that might or might not be true? Besides, a debt was involved, and debts must be paid.

The Jedi made his decision as darkness cloaked the land. He formed the thought, not for the other man, but for himself. *"You spared my life . . . and I'm sparing yours. Use the gift wisely"*

Kyle lowered his electrobinoculars and put them away. "So?" Jan inquired. "What do you think?"

The other agent shrugged. "I can't be certain ... but I think they have a Jedi with them ... and he knows we're here."

Jan looked alarmed. "Then where are the TIE fighters? How come we're alive?"

Kyle shook his head. "I have no idea."

"So we go in?"

"That's what we came for."

"Yeah," Jan said thoughtfully "That's what we came for."

The first of three moons popped over the eastern horizon and threw light across the land.



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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Rebels put the *Crow* down about five clicks from the target. It was dark, and the maneuver called for some fancy flying. The kind Jan had perfected over the last few years. It was a long way from the Valley, but as close as they dared come. The area was crawling with troops, attack droids, and AT-STs. By landing in a canyon, and covering the ship with camouflage netting, they hoped to escape detection.

Wee Gee beeped forlornly when ordered to remain behind, but Kyle was adamant. The droid would be a liability when it came to mountain climbing, and they had enough problems already.

The scouting party consisted of Kyle, Jan, Grif, and the bouncer called Floater. Once the ship was secured, they set off in what Kyle knew to be a southerly direction. Floater led them through a labyrinth of twisting, turning canyons. How the bouncer managed to navigate through the maze was a mystery.

Kyle was surprised by the ease with which the native managed the mountainous terrain. Especially given the extent to which his species had adapted to life in the open desert. The seemingly fragile, balloon-like body and tentacle-style arms were deceiving though. Thanks to his negligible body weight and multiple limbs, Floater climbed with ease. And, while the humans were forced to rappel down the face of vertical cliffs, the bouncer loved to fling himself out into the void and float to the ground. The darkness made the trek even more treacherous, and if it

hadn't been for their night-vision goggles, the humans would have been unable to proceed.

All went well, very well, until the Rebels were half a klick from the Valley. Dawn saw the group ascending the nearly vertical slope of a brittle ravine. Floater had the lead, and Grif came next with Kyle and Jan strung out on ropes below.

Grif had just scrambled up onto a broad shelf when he heard the unmistakable sound of jets firing. An attack droid, now alerted to the Rebel's presence, rose from a dark cleft in the ledge to Grif's left, who did the first thing that came to mind, he charged.

The attack droid had two sometimes countervailing objectives: to gather intelligence and kill intruders.

The second imperative took momentary precedence over the first. That being the case, the machine met charge with charge.

There was no time to pull his blaster, so Grif opened his arms and swore as the machine slammed into his body.

Kyle heard a noise and looked up just in time to see the attack droid, Grif plastered across the front of its casing, sail out over the abyss. It would have been comical if the droid hadn't seized one of the colonist's legs and crushed it with a pair of powerful pincers.

Grif roared in pain, pulled his half-meter-long hunting knife, and rammed it through the robot's thin alloy skin. The blade, which had been fashioned from diamond-hard hull metal, sliced through the machine's wiring harness and shorted the guidance system.

Jan locked herself in place and waited for a shot. The droid spun on its axis and took Grif for a ride. Jan wanted to fire but was afraid to do so. The odds of hitting Grif were way too high, not to mention the fact that her rope had started to sway.

The outposter was furious now, stabbing the machine over and over, and screaming his hatred. "This is for Katie, this is for Carole, and this is for me!"

The settler hit something critical, and the attack droid staggered and then accelerated away. There was a

momentary flash of light as it hit the canyon wall and fell to the rocks below.

Kyle felt Grif's death via the Force, and Jan bit her lip. But there was nothing they could do, nothing but turn back or go on. Kyle scrambled onto the ledge and waited for Jan to join him.

Common sense argued that they go back, but the importance of the mission urged him on. They were close, so close, and there was no assurance that conditions would improve later. In fact, it seemed logical to suppose that the Imperials would tighten their grip, making any sort of incursion that much more difficult. Still, there were other lives at stake, and Kyle had no right to make decisions for Jan or Floater.

Kyle waited until Jan was on the ledge and held a brief council of war. "There's no way to know if the droid sent some sort of report, but we should assume it did. The Imperials will send out a patrol, and it will find the wreckage."

"And Grif's body," Jan said soberly.

"And Grif's body," Kyle agreed. "But what will they conclude when they find it? That he was part of a group? Looking to penetrate the Valley? Or a loner who wound up in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

"We can hope for the second possibility," Jan said judiciously, "but the first seems more likely. Smart people would leave in a hurry."

Kyle scanned her face. "And?"

She shrugged. "We have a mission to carry out. Let's get on with it."

Kyle nodded, looked for Floater, and couldn't find him. He pulled the night-vision goggles down over his eyes and tried again. The native was high above, still climbing. The Rebel grinned and pointed upward. "Well, if actions speak louder than words, then we know what Floater thinks . . . Let's go."

The next few hours were difficult, because of both the physical demands involved and the constant threat of

discovery A shuttle rumbled over their heads on one occasion, and a speeder-bike-mounted patrol passed through an intersecting arroyo on another. The Imperials were so thick, in fact, that Kyle was about to look for a hiding place when Floater led them to the aqueduct. It was about ten meters across and six high. Unlike the open irrigation canals common on many planets, the aqueduct incorporated a lid designed to limit the amount of water lost through evaporation. A lid that hid the Rebels from ships passing above.

The fact that the ancient waterway followed the contour of the land and led toward the Valley of the Jedi made it perfect. Kyle gave Floater an approving pat and followed the native into the darkness.

Jerec stood, hands clasped behind his hack, and stared out through the transparisteel window. Or that's the way it appeared, given that the Jedi was blind. However, "seeing" involves as many dimensions as "knowing," and Jerec saw many things that were hidden from others, not the least of which was the metaphysical storm that raged around the Valley below and the power imprisoned there.

The thought brought a smile to Jerec's lips. The Valley was everything he had hoped for and more.

By tapping the power resident there and shaping it to his will, the Dark Jedi would control the Empire. No, not the pathetic remains of what Palpatine and others had frittered away, but something new, something glorious, something never seen before.

An Empire that reached beyond the accomplishments of the past, beyond the surrounding star systems, beyond neighboring galaxies to include all that was or would ever be, now *that* was a goal!

*That* was an empire.

He would have to be careful, however, very careful, since the forces that prevented the Jedi spirits from leaving the Valley had weakened with the passage of time and needed to be strengthened. An escape would be disastrous, since

the power he required flowed from the prisoners. No need to worry, though, since repairs had begun and would soon be complete.

The thought pleased him, and the Jedi frowned as a voice sounded from behind him. "Lord Jerec?"

"Yes? What now?"

The officer, a relatively junior lieutenant, swallowed nervously. "A report, sir . . . from Attack Droid AD-43. A party of three humans and an unclassified alien passed through Perimeter Two and are headed this way."

"Current status?"

"We aren't sure. AD-43 was destroyed. Other assets have been dispatched but haven't arrived yet."

The Jedi considered the officer's words. Now that the Valley was under his control, Jerec was in no particular hurry. He needed time to prepare, but more than that, time in which to savor that which destiny had placed before him, much as a gourmet might linger over a rare and carefully prepared dessert.

There was leakage, though, leakage that could double or even triple his ability and whet his appetite for more. The Jedi Master directed a thought outward, steered a circle around the cauldron of churning energy, and located a place where a steady stream of pitch-black energy had broken through the protective shell and strobed into space.

Jerec chose a single shaft of negative energy, drew on its power, and felt himself expand. Bigger and bigger until his mind was everywhere, until he was one with the dark inner fabric of the Force itself, until he stood on the very brink of what he perceived as being all-powerful.

Not the state of enlightenment that so many prattled on about, but a state in which power could be accessed, shaped, and applied, all without the years of tedious meditation, study, and apprenticeship that proponents of the light side considered so necessary. Even better was the next step, the step beyond Jedi Mastery, into which Jerec now passed.

And it was there, in a state approaching all-knowingness,

that he swept the ethers for signs of life.

Thousands appeared, each instantly identifiable, each distinct from all the rest. He felt the lieutenant, only meters away, frightened and eager to leave; his bodyguards, their minds blank with boredom; Sariss, seething with plans; Boc, relishing someone else's discomfort; Yun, confused and unsure; Maw, looking to express his rage; animals, following the dictates of their genetic programming; and there, closer than he would have thought, the intruders. And not just any intruders, but Kyle Katarn!

But wait, the boy had changed, had grown into more than an annoyance: a Jedi Knight! Not entirely unexpected, since Jerec had been aware of the boy's potential before he had, but surprising nonetheless. A self-taught Jedi was nearly unheard of- unless!- and the truth flooded his mind. The youth had a mentor: Rahn!

Laughter came as if from a long way off, and Jerec felt a sudden stab of fear. He felt a desire to reach out, to crush that which opposed him, but brought the impulse under control. It was an interesting development, but not an immediate threat.

"Besides," Jerec mused, directing the thought outward, "Even the best blade can be turned against those who forged it."

The laughter stopped, and a smile touched Jerec's lips. A nerve had been struck. Somewhere within the maze of beliefs, thoughts, and experiences that made up Kyle Katarn's personality, a flaw existed, a flaw that, like Yun's need for approval or Boc's senseless sadism, could be leveraged. The thought pleased the Jedi, and a decision was reached.

"Maintain surveillance. Keep me informed."

The lieutenant's boots made a clicking sound as he popped to attention. "Sir! Yes, sir!"

A column of troops wound past the tower and made their way toward the ancient storerooms hidden within the Valley's walls. The harvest continued. Life was good.

The aqueduct was old, very old, or so it felt as Jan followed Kyle toward a distant pinpoint of light. Their glow rods projected blobs of light onto walls smoothed by the passage of water. Side tunnels appeared from time to time, their mouths gaping open, hinting at destinations deep within the rock.

Kyle said, "Watch your step," but not before something crackled underfoot. Jan directed her light downward. The skeleton, or what remained of a skeleton, belonged to a species she hadn't seen before.

Had it been sentient? The eye sockets looked reproachful, as if the answer was obvious.

The light grew brighter, and the tunnel opened onto a ledge. Floater gestured with his tentacles, and Kyle crawled out. Jan followed. A wall of hand-fitted stone provided some cover, or so it seemed until a pair of TIE fighters roared by; banked around a pillar of rock, and disappeared.

Jan low-crawled to Kyle's side, got up onto her knees, and looked over the side. A tower soared hundreds of feet into the air. Landing platforms sprouted to either side, as did retractable loading arms.

Jan watched as a heavily laden freighter broke contact, dropped fifty meters, caught itself, and lumbered away.

The ship would have to wend its way through a series of interconnecting canyons before emerging over the desert where it could build speed. Speed that would allow it to break free of the planet's gravity well and pass through the atmosphere. A sure sign that the Imperials had found something worth stealing.

There were other freighters, too, along with shuttles and a gaggle of TIE fighters.

Kyle scanned the valley below. He watched a pair of AT-STs lumber along a trail, a trio of attack droids scoot toward the tower, and a column of stormtroopers march toward a prefab building.

Jan nudged his arm. "So, what do you think?"

"It's worse than I imagined," Kyle responded, scanning the column through his electrobinoculars.

"Much worse. The Imperials really have their hooks into this place."

Jan nodded. "That's for sure."

"Wait a minute," Kyle said softly. "Look who's here."

The Jedi handed the electrobinoculars to Jan and pointed toward the tower. "On the topmost landing platform. A man and a woman."

Jan focused on the very top of the tower and allowed the glasses to drift down until a platform appeared. The woman wore black, as did the man. "I see them. Who are they?"

"The man is Jerec," Kyle answered thoughtfully. "The woman is one of the many Jedi who serve him."

"Like the ones you killed on Sulon?"

"Exactly."

"So what do we do now?"

"You wait here," Kyle said, "while I visit the tower."

"I'm coming, too."

"And leave Floater all by himself?"

Jan regarded the Jedi with open suspicion. Was he trying to protect her? While using the bouncer as an excuse? Or was he genuinely concerned for the alien's safety? It was impossible to tell.

"You'll get into trouble."

Kyle grinned. "And you'll get me out."

Neither noticed the sky-eye that rode the thermals above them, nor were they aware of the high-res holo beamed to the tower.

The hours after Kyle's departure passed with excruciating slowness. The sun rose, the temperature increased, and Floater was forced to retreat into the relative darkness of the aqueduct. Jan, fearful that she might miss something, remained where she was.

It was difficult, however, difficult to remain hidden, and difficult to stay awake. It had been a long, strenuous night, and that, combined with the warmth of the sun, made her drowsy. That's why the combat skimmer was able to get so close and Jan turned too late.



The skimmer, the stormtroopers, and the knowledge that she had committed a terrible error all registered on Jan's consciousness at the same moment.

The vehicle carried a half-dozen troops. An officer pointed and yelled.

Once alerted, the Rebel was fast, extremely fast, and the blaster seemed to leap into her fist. She fired, the officer fell out of the skimmer, and the pintle-mounted energy cannon burped in response. The beam passed over Jan's head and hit the aqueduct.

Super-heated rock exploded in every direction, and the opening collapsed. An officer yelled, "Alive, you idiot!" and Jan fell backward as the skimmer threatened to crush her. It took less than three minutes for the troopers to pile out of the skimmer, pat down the agent, and secure her hands.

An officer, anonymous behind his visor, gave the necessary orders. "Put her aboard . . . shift enough rock to make a hole. There could be more, and I want every single one of them."

Jan remembered the side tunnels that led deep into the mountainside and knew where Floater would go. It was a small consolation, but better than nothing. Her thoughts turned to Kyle. What would he do without her? And if it came to that, what would she do without him?

Kyle felt something was wrong but couldn't put a finger on what it was. He pushed his consciousness outward, searching for danger, and found nothing but tranquility. Comforting, but impossible given the circumstances. It was as if someone or some-thing had smothered his senses.

But that was impossible, wasn't it?

The uneasiness continued as Kyle lowered himself down through a three-sided chimney and dropped to the ground. He'd been lucky, almost too lucky, but there was nothing he could do about it.

The Jedi considered the rope and decided to leave it. Assuming that his luck held and he made it back, the line would come in handy.

The passage of time, combined with natural forces of erosion, had caused boulders to accumulate at the foot of the cliff. The Rebel used them to conceal his movements.

The tower made an excellent and highly visible landmark. The agent waited until he was opposite the structure, worked his way out toward the Valley floor, and peeked through a gap in the rocks.

The area between Kyle's hiding place and the base of the tower was completely open. To cross was out of the question. All he could do was wait.

An hour passed. The sun pounded down, sweat poured off his body, and his water disappeared one swallow at a time. The agent's situation was desperate by the time a tractor appeared and offered the only chance he was likely to get. He saw a single guard sitting next to the driver, engaged in conversation.

Kyle waited for the tractor to draw abreast of his position, dashed across the intervening space, and jumped onto a coupler. A train of fifteen cars jerked along behind the tractor and raised an enormous cloud of reddish brown dust. It made him cough, but the noise generated by the tractor's engine covered the sound.

The train passed a half-filled vehicle park and wound past the tower. Kyle waited till the moment was right, jumped to the ground, and made a dash for one of the enormous footings on which the vertical structure rested. He waited for an alarm. None came.

Kyle turned and scuttled toward the tower's inner core. The sentries, their attention focused on the Valley beyond, stood with their backs to him. The Rebel marched by, hit the "up" button, and waited for the lift. The doors opened and a brace of Commandos appeared.

Kyle had his lightsaber tucked under his arm, much as an officer might carry a swagger stick, and nodded as he marched by. The Rebel did a smart about-face, saw that one of the Imperials looked as if he wanted to say something, and frowned.

That, plus the lightsaber, did the trick. The Dark Jedi,

because that's who the Imperials assumed he was, were notoriously short-tempered. So much so that neither one cared to try his patience.

The door rolled into place, and the turbolift rose with what would have been commendable speed had Kyle been in a hurry. Yes, he was Jedi, and yes, he had proven himself against three of the Dark Master's subordinates, but the thought of going one-on-one with Jerec himself terrified him. What he needed was help, a whole bunch of it.

Thought was answered with thought as Rahn flooded Kyle's mind. "The Force is with you, as am I."

Kyle forced a grin. "What? No breaks?"

"Not lately" the Jedi Master replied dryly, "not since your arrival on Ruusan."

"Good. I need your help."

"Knowing that, and admitting it, signals strength. The half-man awaits. Use my name to seize the advantage."

Who was the half-man? And what difference would Rahn's name make? Kyle wanted to ask a half-dozen questions, but the lift started to slow. The agent readied the lightsaber, allowed his thumb to rest on the switch, and kept his eyes on the door.

The lift came to a halt. A tone sounded, and a light came on. The door rolled open, and a messenger droid scurried through the opening. It squeaked, sent a signal to the turbolift, and waited for the platform to fall.

Kyle approached the entrance, looked out onto an empty platform, and heard machinery whir. The message was clear: get off or take his chances on the lift. There was no sign of a half-man, whole man, or any other kind of man. Surprised by Rahn's error, and more than a little apprehensive, the Rebel stepped out onto the platform. The tone sounded, and the door closed behind him. A loading ramp jutted off to the right, and a cargo ship hung beyond that.

Kyle took two steps forward, felt something "pop," and felt a sudden flood of sensation. Nothing exotic, not by his standards anyway just the sort of input he normally

received via the Force but had been unable to access for the last ten to fifteen minutes. Why?

The answer came with terrifying speed. Something, he wasn't sure what, hit his shoulder and sent him sprawling. He rolled onto his back, jumped to his feet, and lit the lightsaber. The air crackled and filled with the odor of ozone.

That was the moment when Kyle realized that Rahn had been right —the lower half of his opponent's body was missing! It was the Force that held him up off the ground. The Dark Jedi's skull was shaved and seemed too small for his body. Hatred filled his eyes and pulled at his thick-lipped mouth. Two equally enormous arms hung from his muscle-bound torso, and one ended in a lightsaber.

In addition to holding the Jedi up off the deck, the Force exerted its influence over other objects as well, including nuts, bolts, pebbles, a ration bar, and various bits of wire. All of which orbited the half-man's body as if he were the sun and they were his planets. The lightsaber buzzed with malevolent energy, and his words had a grating sound. "I am Maw. Prepare to die!"

"Maybe," Kyle replied calmly, "I remember that my friend Rahn already cut you down to size."

The effect was electrifying. Maw's face turned purple with anger, and he uttered a roar of pure, undiluted rage. He accelerated with far greater speed than Kyle had anticipated. The Rebel fell backward, allowed the Dark Jedi to pass over him, and slashed upward.

Maw bellowed with pain, lost his concentration, and hit the deck. The lightsaber sailed out of his hand, and debris rained onto his head and shoulders.

Kyle took a single step forward, eyed his opponent's back, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Maw supported himself with his fists, turned, and looked upward. "I'm defenseless . . . kill me! Or do you lack the courage? As your father did before you?"

Kyle dropped his head. Anger, contained and controlled for so long, flowered within. He felt it radiate outward, seep

through his body, and tingle at his fingertips. The lightsaber hummed, and his fingers wrapped and rewrapped themselves around the well-worn grip. Here was one of the people who had murdered his father, and not just his father, but hundreds, maybe thousands, more. Killing such a person would be just, yet . . .

Maw grinned demonically. "Your father was on his knees, whimpering like a child, as Jerec struck him down. I placed his head on the spike where the rest of the Rebel scum could see it."

The lightsaber blurred as it rose and fell. The blade entered the half-man's left shoulder, sliced through his chest, and exited through the right side of his body. There was an explosion of blood as Maw fell into two distinct pieces, and Kyle felt energy swirl around him. Dark energy, attracted by the nature of his act, ready for use. Shocked by what he had done and sickened by the slaughter, Kyle backed away.

A voice came from behind. "Excellent. The journey to the dark side has begun. But there is more."

Kyle turned to discover that Jerec, Sariss, and Boc had stepped off the turbolift, and that Jan was with them. Boc gave Jan a wholly unnecessary shove. She stumbled and caught herself. Kyle saw the bruises on her face and realized that her arms were bound.

Jan forced a grin. "Sorry, Kyle, looks like I can't bail you out of this one."

Jerec gave her a push and Jan fell. He pointed to where she lay. "Strike her down! Realize your true destiny . . . your true power."

Time stretched thin. Jerec felt Kyle's hunger, the ambition that seeped up through his consciousness, and allowed himself a smile. Here was the flaw that Rahn feared, here was the lever he'd been looking for, and here was a hunger that matched his own. Jan watched the other agent's eyes, saw temptation flicker there, and wondered if she had misjudged him.

Boc simpered, did a little dance, and waited for someone

to die. He wore two lightsabers, one thrust through the back of his sash and one in front. Kyle looked from Jerec to Jan and back again. The fact that he'd been tempted, could be tempted, made his stomach churn.

"No."

The Dark Jedi drew upon the energy that leaked out of the Valley, gave it shape, and hurled the construct at Kyle's chest. The blast threw the Rebel backward onto the loading ramp. He staggered and had just managed to reestablish his footing when a second, more powerful explosion hurled him back into the cargo ship. The lock sensed his presence, and the hatch started to close. The ramp disintegrated. The ship tilted away, and fell toward the rocks below.

Jan rose, tried to make her way to the edge of the platform, and was slammed to the deck. Boc laughed and put a foot on her chest.

Unaware of what was going on above, Kyle smashed into a bulkhead and knew what he had to do.

Head for the belly of the ship and pass through the docking port. It was his only chance.

The docking port? Why the docking port? But there was no answer —just an overriding sense of urgency.

The inner hatch opened, and Kyle ducked through and found himself in one of two corridors that ran the length of the ship. As with most ships of her design, there was an emergency drop shaft that ran top to bottom through the ship's hull. Kyle staggered as the nose tilted down. He dropped to his knees and opened the access door set flush with the deck.

A ladder was welded to one side of the drop shaft. The Rebel clamped the side rails between his boots, slid downward, and triggered the hatch. The agent dropped through and landed on the docking port. Or would have, had the freighter been level. Because the ship was tilted nose down, the Rebel hit forward of the hatch and had to battle his way up.

Precious seconds passed while he cycled through the lock and entered a familiar-looking compartment. The *Crow*!

The Imperials had located the ship and flown it to the tower. The agent heard a beeping sound and knew that Wee Gee was locked in one of the storage compartments. There was no time to free him, however. If he could bring the engines on-line, if he could break the connection . .

The odds were against him, but there was little else that Kyle could do. He fought his way into the cockpit, dropped into the pilot's position, and hit the emergency bypass switch. Alarms sounded and lights flashed as the vessel's nay computer took exception to the breach in protocol. Freed from normal safety procedures and responding to the Rebel's prayers, the engines came to life.

Kyle bit his lip, hit the emergency release button, and felt the vessels part company. The application of power, plus a turn to port, increased the distance between them. The agent pulled back on the control yoke, saw a flash as the cargo ship corkscrewed into the ground, and fought for altitude.

The *Crow* shook violently, rattled Kyle's teeth, and slammed into a rocky spire. The port engine sheared off, the nose dropped, and the ground rushed up to meet her. The hull hit, bounced, and started to slide.

Kyle thought about the safety harness, wished he was buckled in, and felt his head strike the control panel. The Rebel was unconscious by the time the ship skidded to a halt. The dream, if it was a dream, seemed incredibly real.

Rahn smiled as if welcoming Kyle home. He wore a cream-colored robe with a hood that fell across his shoulders.

"That which is flows from that which was. The best way to learn is to feel what it was like."

The Jedi faded from view, and Kyle became aware that another mind coexisted with his. Though seemingly unaware of him, he was aware of it, and all that it contained. There were memories of a youth spent exploring the stars, a passion for a woman long dead, and a planet frosted with ice and snow.

There was a weariness as well, for the mind was very, very old.

But evil cares little for age or infirmity. It grows where it can, sinking its roots deep into the rich fertilizer of ego, lust, greed, envy, and hatred, sending new shoots to the surface where they form a tangle from which nothing can escape. That's why Tal had taken his lightsaber down from its place above the hearth and joined the Army of Light.

"Tal? Are you awake?"

It wasn't until the Jedi opened his eyes that Kyle realized they'd been closed. A man sat across from him: a giant of a man with shoulder-length blond hair, a lantern-shaped jaw, and ice-blue eyes. They twinkled merrily. "There you are. I was afraid you'd sleep through the surrender."

Tat chose his words with care. Hoth might be a Jedi, and a great one at that, but many voices vied for his attention. So many it was difficult for the big man to sort them out. Which was why Tal reserved his council for only the most important issues and chose his words with care. "There won't be a surrender, not today, at any rate."

Lord Hoth's face grew dark as if hidden from the sun. "You try my patience, old one. We conjured an army from nothing. We turned freighters into warships. We traveled through many systems, conquered all that the dark ones placed in our way, and arrived on Ruusan. Here we fought seven terrible battles, battles in which thousands of Jedi died. In spite of their superior numbers, in spite of their brutality; in spite of their willingness to invoke the dark side of the Force, the Brotherhood of Darkness lost all but two of those engagements. Only one choice remains to them . . . and that's surrender. Why deny the obvious?"

Tal shrugged. "Because what we consider to be unthinkable they will accomplish in a heartbeat."

"What?" Hoth demanded. "What do you fear? Put a name to it. I cannot act on a single being's forebodings, no matter how trusted that individual may be."

Tal searched for the words that would explain his misgivings and came up empty. "I'm sorry, sire . . . It's a feeling. Nothing less and nothing more."

Hoth shook his head irritably. "I'm surrounded by every



sort of sycophant, soothsayer, and clairvoyant. A pox on the lot of you. Come, it's time to go."

Tal used the arms of the campaign chair to push himself up and out of the seat. He bowed. "I pray that I am wrong, sire, for nothing would please me more. I will be at your side no matter the outcome."

Hoth smiled and took the old man's hand. "I know and take strength from it. Come . . . history awaits."

The Jedi leader collected his lightsaber, threw his cape back over a shoulder, and strode into the sunshine. The Army of Light saw him emerge, and a thousand voices roared his name.

Tal took one last look around the inside of the tent, knew he would never see it again, and hobbled toward the entrance.

It took the better part of the morning to pull the troops together, march up the winding road, and enter the Valley. Tal was thankful for the fact that the going was slow, since age had robbed his once-responsive body of its strength and quickness.

But not his mind. If anything, it was stronger, anchored by more than eighty years of experience and alert to the slightest stirring of the Force. Tal could feel what the Dark Ones had achieved. The Force seemed to congeal like blood in a wound, to thicken the air around them, to press against their chests.

The others felt it, too, for they were Jedi and wise in the ways of the Force. Expressions turned grim, muscles strained against the invisible burden, and the air crackled with unreleased energy.

Poles appeared along both sides of the road. Each bore the scavenger-pecked remains of a Jedi, their clothes filled with momentary life as the wind pushed in to explore them.

Cliffs crowded the road and served as vantage points from which the Dark Ones could watch. Their ranks were thinner now, much thinner, but no less intimidating. Their banners flapped languidly in the breeze, their eyes projected hate, and their hands rested on well-worn weapons. For these

were the survivors, the beings so skilled at mental-physical combat that seven hard-fought battles had not only failed to bring them down but served to hone their skills. Tal knew that they were- and would always be- dangerous.

A double row of heads appeared, one to each side of the road, many still recognizable. Tal saw one of his students, her eyes empty of the humor for which she'd been known, and felt a deep sense of sorrow. He thought about Hoth, about begging the Jedi Master to call the whole thing off, but knew it was useless. The same determination that made Hoth a great leader would result in his downfall. Nothing could turn him . . . nothing but death itself.

The chambers, almost as large as the ego they had been created for, stretched for miles. Their location deep within the ground had proven to be bomb proof, missile proof, and assault proof. Up till now, that is. More than a thousand battle-torn flags hung from the walls, many of which still bore the blood of those who had carried them.

The leaders to whom the flags had been entrusted, or what remained of those leaders, were arrayed before the flags. Some were human —many were not. Their eyes were blank, their cavities were filled with preservatives, and their bodies were supported by steel rods.

The trophies stood in two inward-facing ranks and formed the letter V. Kaan sat at the point where the lines came together on a throne made of bones. He had white hair, a prominent forehead, and a finely pointed chin. Power radiated away from the Jedi like heat off a sun-baked rock. It caused the air to shimmer, sent static through pocket comms, and hurt unprotected minds. His eyes were filled with hatred and probed the beings in front of him.

"They come."

Kaan's second, third, and fourth in command were dead, killed during hellacious battles of the past few weeks. Number five, the Sith known as LaTor, stepped forward and bowed. Kyle bowed with him.

"Yes, my lord. They come."

"We have no way to stop them? No strategy for salvation?"

LaTor, half his face obscured by a blood-stained bandage, shook his head. "No, my lord, none I am aware of."

"Then we must create one! Surrender is unthinkable. Assemble my Sith."

"Yes, my lord."

It took the better part of two hours to spread the word, to bring what remained of the Brotherhood into chambers, and to settle them down.

Once assembled, the Dark Army was woefully small. Less than two thousand Sith compared to ten times that number that had followed Kaan into the first few battles. Still, small though they were in number, these were the smartest, strongest, and most powerful of the lot, for the rest were dead, having been overpowered by Hoth and the Army of Light. The air hummed with barely controlled energy. Kaan stood and the chambers fell silent. His eyes roamed the audience, found those he knew to be leaders, and claimed their minds.

"Greetings, brethren . . . and welcome to darkness. Our great and noble cause has come to an end. The forces who favor anarchy over structure have won. For what is this 'democracy' they speak of if not the absence of order? Of reason? Surely the strong, should rule, for that is nature's way.

"But we must forget what could have been and focus on what is. Defeat looms only hours away and with it, the loss of all we had hoped for. I ask that you join me in one last task. The creation of a weapon so powerful that when it is detonated, the victors shall become the vanquished and be swept from the pages of history."

Kaan was a skilled orator and knew when to stop. The chambers fell silent. LaTor allowed the silence to build- and broke it with the traditional salute. "Kaan rules!"

The answer came like thunder and echoed off the chamber walls. "Kaan rules!"

And so the decision was made to place death before life. More than a thousand highly trained minds were focused on a single task. First came the creation of a mental

construct that was analogous to a bomb casing. A container in which energy could be stored. Then came the process of turning the Force inside out, of tapping the darkness within and channeling that energy into the newly created vessel.

Time hung suspended, the air crackled with barely suppressed energy, and three of the Sith died, their minds overcome by the violence of the process. Others went insane, rose with weapons drawn, and were executed by the master-at-arms.

Kyle was a novice compared to those around him and might have been killed if it hadn't been for LaTor and the other Jedi's strength. For LaTor was strong, very strong, and Kyle was impressed by the power resident in the dark side. The power and the relative ease of access—a temptation for anyone with the necessary talent.

Finally, their robes soaked with sweat and their hearts beating like trip hammers, the Brotherhood was done. The thought bomb was complete. The time had come to venture out into the sunlight, to embrace the victors and drag them into hell.

The final confrontation came in the Valley located above the chambers. It was there, in an amphitheater carved by the forces of wind, rain, and erosion, that the Brotherhood of Darkness had assembled and waited for death.

And it was into the Valley that Tal dragged his aching body, knowing that death hovered nearby but determined to protect his master's back.

And it was there that Kaan, the Lord of Darkness, met Hoth, Defender of the Light, and gestured to the cliffs that rose on every side.

"Welcome, Lord Hoth. Welcome to the grave and darkness from which none will ever emerge."

The thought was relatively trivial, much as the pressure exerted by a marksman represents only a fraction of his total strength but has the capacity to destroy that which he could never create.

The explosion that followed was anything but trivial, however, for it shattered the construct made to contain it

and filled the Valley with destruction. Tal reeled under the impact, felt his body snatched away, and was thrown toward the stars. Joy filled his heart. Freedom! He was free from pain- free from-

Nature abhors a vacuum, however, and the emptiness at the heart of the explosion had to be filled with something, so it sucked Tal in. Tal and all the rest. Understanding filled the Jedi's mind.

His screams were nearly lost among the others. "No! Please! No!"

But the matter was settled. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and consistent with that law, both armies were pulled back in. A state of equilibrium was achieved as force matched force, and they were trapped. Thrown together for eternity, or until something disrupted the existing balance.

Tal, and his alter ego, Kyle, were still in the process of absorbing that, of understanding it, when the Rebel awoke.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

Kyle awoke to pain, more pain than he had ever felt before and more pain than he wanted to feel again. So much pain that it took a moment to realize that it belonged to him, and not his alter ego, Tal.

The Rebel opened his eyes, saw stars twinkling high above, and felt cold night air enter his lungs. He tried to sit. What felt like a six centimeter-long needle passed through his skull and entered his brain. He groaned and leaned on an elbow.

That's when Boc shuffled forward and Kyle realized that others were present. His heart sank. The Imperials had entered the *Crow* and dragged him clear. The worm-head? It didn't matter. The female was present, her mouth pressed into a hard straight line, as was the Jedi Kyle had battled on Sulon and subsequently spared. The same one who had located the missing patrol? Yes, the personality felt the same. Their eyes met, held, and broke as Boc brought a lightsaber out from under his cloak.

"My, my . . . such a nasty crash . . . You're lucky to be alive . . . or are you? Oh, what's this? A lightsaber, no, not just any lightsaber, but your lightsaber, and a pretty piece of work it is."

Boc placed the weapon on a flat piece of shale, grabbed a rock, and raised it over his head. Kyle tried to rise, made it to one knee, and paused as pain filled his head.

Boc grinned. "Yes? Did you want something? No? Well, let's see how sturdy this saber really is . . ."

So saying, the alien Jedi brought the rock down with all his

strength. There was a crunching sound, and pieces of saber flew in every direction.

Boc chuckled. "Blast! They just don't make 'em like they used to . . . Oh well, it's not as if you built the weapon yourself. That would take brains."

Sariss drew her weapon and flicked the switch. The air popped and sizzled. "Enough ... Tell Jerec that we located Katarn and put him down."

Boc glanced from Sariss to Kyle and placed a hand over his mouth. "Oops! That doesn't sound very promising, does it? But what did you expect? Milk and cookies?"

The Jedi broke into peals of laughter, turned, and shuffled away. Sariss turned toward Kyle and raised her weapon.

Kyle looked into the glow and thought about Jan. Was she dead? Would they be together?

Sariss tightened her grip and brought the weapon down. Yun saw everything in slow motion, felt himself respond, and wondered why. Had he made a decision? There was no memory of one . . . Not a single decision, anyway, just a long chain of seemingly minor decisions, which, taken together, added up to an important decision. The lightsaber seemed to ignite on its own. If his aim was good, if the training paid off, he would nick his mentor's arm. She would miss, and Katarn would be spared. Not for long, probably, but he couldn't control that.

Blood flew as energy sliced through flesh. Startled by the attack, and reacting instinctively, Sariss turned. Her lightsaber rose, fell, and sliced through Yun's shoulder. The younger Jedi looked surprised, gave a gasp of pain, and sank to his knees.

Sariss was horrified. Yun, her best student and the closest thing she had to a friend, was dying. Why? It was impossible, yet there he was, kneeling before her. She screamed for a medic, and the echoes seemed to mock her.

Yun's head came up. His eyes saw through her. "Sariss, can you see the light? How bright it is?"

Then he was gone. He leaned forward until his forehead touched the ground and then fell on his side.

Kyle saw Sariss turn her back in his direction, saw Yun drop the lightsaber, and used the Force to "grab" it. The weapon made a slapping sound as it hit the palm of his hand. The Rebel pushed up through the pain, fought a wave of dizziness, and thumbed the unfamiliar switch.

Each lightsaber was as unique as the sentient who built it and Yun's was no exception. It came equipped with what Kyle's fencing instructor would have called a "modified pistol grip," meaning that carefully cast projections echoed the human hand and gave his index finger a place to rest.

Not only that, but the grip was made from a highly malleable "live" polymer that explored Kyle's hand and morphed into a solid, highly customized grip. Kyle had never dreamed of such a thing but immediately fell in love with it.

The Rebel raised the weapon into the traditional "on-guard" position and could almost hear the Academy's fencing instructor. He had a squeaky high-pitched voice: "Keep your head up, look at your opponent, and check your balance. The point should be at eye level, or slightly lower, like so. A steel blade differs from a lightsaber, of course . . . but many of the same techniques apply."

Sariss turned. Her eyes burned with anger. There was more than enough time. No cut would be fatal in and of itself, but each added to all the rest would result in a painful death. Then, after his life force had been released and his blood had mingled with the sand, she would take his head. Not that it would compensate for the pain in her arm or the ache in her heart.

Kyle swallowed, knowing his opponent was more experienced than he, and then suddenly reeled under the impact of a mental attack. This battle would be fought on two planes. One mental, the other physical, just like the ones in his "dream."

The Jedi accessed the knowledge gained from the long-dead Tal, blocked the mental strike and answered with an attack of his own. He launched a head cut from the third position, flexed his wrist, and extended his arm.



Though a good deal lighter than its metal counterpart, the Jedi energy weapon possessed similar characteristics. It could penetrate like a rapier and cut like a saber. A double-edged saber.

Sariss blocked the mental blow, wondered where Katarn had garnered such knowledge, and found herself under attack. Her opponent's skill was a surprise, and reminded her that this was no ordinary Rebel.

There were various ways to defend against his attack. Sariss chose parry five followed by a well-practiced riposte. Her blade passed under Katarn's, buzzed as it passed through the outer corona of the field created by his blade, and lunged toward his chest.

Energy crackled and popped as the agent intercepted her blow—and disengaged.

The attack had failed, so Kyle selected another. The point-thrust was a relatively simple evolution. He dropped the point of his saber, extended his arm, and lunged.

Sariss saw it coming, blocked the other Jedi's blade, and spotted an error. Katarn's wrist was too low, a little below the shoulder, opening the Rebel to a head cut. She lunged as he pulled back, saw a thin red line appear on his right cheek, and felt a sense of satisfaction. The upstart had been lucky, but she would literally cut him down to size. Yun would be revenged.

Kyle saw a flash of color and heard the blade sizzle past his face. His nostrils were filled with the odor of burnt flesh. His own. Pain followed. Pain layered on pain. He knew the cut was a harbinger of things to come. He was tired, hurt, and less experienced. The Dark Jedi intended to wear him down.

What he needed was a quick, decisive conclusion. The agent assumed the on-guard position and called upon Tal's knowledge. What would the ancient Master do if confronted with a similar situation?

Sariss sensed the other Jedi's hesitation, mistook it for fear, and launched a feint. It was directed at Kyle's belly. He fell for it, saw her pull back, and knew the lunge would

follow. He managed to parry, felt resistance as her saber clashed with his, and found the answer he'd been searching for.

Tal had been a student of another no-less-formal school of swordsmanship that was half-physical and half-spiritual in nature. There were many evolutions, and many "cuts," but only one that "sang" with the moment.

"The Flowing Water Cut" was for use when going blade-to-blade with an opponent. Timing was everything ... and as Sariss withdrew . . . Kyle knew that he should "expand," following with body and spirit, like water into a vessel. And there, within the calm, to cut slowly and release Sariss from her body.

Action followed thought. His blade strobed through the other Jedi's chest and the point emerged between her shoulder blades. There was very little blood since the wound was cauterized as it was made.

Sariss looked surprised. Her eyes went down toward the point of entry, up toward his, and then were gone. She fell over backward, hit the ground, and skidded on loose gravel.

Kyle just stood there, swaying slightly, struggling to absorb what had occurred. He was alive, still alive, which both amazed and pleased him. But what next? Find Jan? Search for Jerrec? Both ideas had merit, but how?

Cliffs stood hard and black off to his left, but the sun had started to rise, throwing: soft pinkish light onto a pinnacle of stone. The shadow fell downward and pointed to the Valley below.

Suddenly, and without knowing how he knew, Kyle knew where to go. He said good-bye to Yun, who had sacrificed his life for something he had just started to understand, and wished the Jedi well.

Gravel crunched under the agent's boots as he followed the shadow toward the opening and that which waited below. There were sentries to contend with, and a patrol on its way out into the badlands, but Kyle ignored them. A Commando saw him and stepped forward. "Halt! Who goes there?"

Kyle extended a hand. "You have seen me many times before- and are aware of my authority."

The Commando nodded. "Sorry, sir, I didn't realize it was you."

The Jedi nodded and proceeded on his way. The area around the opening had been cleared of debris. The stairs were wide enough to accommodate four men walking abreast. They were cut from solid stone and followed the curve of the wall.

The light improved as the sun rose and sent rays of light down into the chamber. The air thickened around Kyle's shoulders, and he heard a moaning sound, as if from a multitude in pain. Alien hieroglyphics appeared on the walls, and the Jedi reached out to touch them as the stairs carried him downward.

Light gleamed off something down in the murk. It attracted the Rebel's eye and made him curious. What could it be? A piece of scrap? An artifact?

Kyle arrived on the chamber floor, made his way to the area where the reflection had appeared, and toed a pile of debris. Metal clattered as the Jedi spotted what he'd been searching for. He knew the object by feel alone: A multi-tool, similar to the one he carried, but older. Anyone could have dropped the device, but something, he wasn't sure what, caused the Jedi to examine the object more closely. He turned toward the light and saw an engraving: "To Dad, from Kyle."

The Jedi felt a lump form in his throat as he realized that his father had made it this far and, while unable to free the spirits within, had set their rescue in motion. Assuming that he lived long enough to complete the mission, that is.

What had his father felt? Having come all that way? And lacking the ability to go farther? Had he been frustrated? Fearful? There was no way to know, but one thing was for sure: The knowledge that Morgan Katarn had been there, and would expect him to persevere, strengthened Kyle's resolve.

The multi-tool made a comfortable weight in Kyle's pocket

as he moved forward. His senses were heightened, and a thousand impressions flooded his mind. He had originally viewed the Force in the abstract, as something outside of himself, but not any longer.

Now Kyle felt at one with the Force. It surged and seethed as if only barely contained. It trickled through the pores in his skin, filled each living cell, and displaced pain and fatigue. He felt light, strong, powerful.

Was that good? Or something to be feared? The half-man's death still weighed on the Jedi's conscience and caused him to question his motives. Cautiously, because he was both unsure of himself and of what he might encounter; Kyle approached a heavily shadowed arch. He stepped through and into the Valley of the Jedi.

A thousand tombs marched across the Valley floor. Each was different, as unique as the spirit to whom it had been dedicated, and a work of art. Years, perhaps hundreds of them, had been lavished on the vast memorial.

Kyle was overwhelmed by the pure spectacle of the place. He wandered down a corridor from which narrower walkways branched to either side. He saw statues, some of which were modeled on humans while others depicted aliens, each rendered in astonishing, lifelike detail. Here, captured in stone, was the Army of Light. Who were the artisans? And what happened to them? The bouncers seemed like the most likely candidates, although there was no way to be sure.

A head appeared above all others, and Kyle walked in that direction. It was Lord Hoth, his eyes focused on something Kyle couldn't see, a hand on his lightsaber. The Jedi looked so real, so powerful, that the Rebel half-expected him to speak.

And there, just to the Jedi Master's right, stood another familiar figure. The man stood tall in spite of the years that weighed on his shoulders. He wore a long, white beard, and even though a hood concealed most of the Jedi's face, Kyle knew who it was. Still loyal, still at his master's side, Tal waited through the years.

Hoth, and the manner in which he towered over the figures around him, gave Kyle an idea. He glanced around, spotted a tomb with a flat top, and made his way over to it. A ledge ran around the structure and served as a step. Gargoyles, their eyes bulging, functioned as handholds.

Once on top, Kyle had an excellent view of the Valley. He saw a row of columns, realized someone had been tied to one of them, and knew who it was. Jan was alive!

Kyle felt his heart leap, crossed to the other side of the slab, and looked down. Another tomb stood two meters below. The top had been sculptured to resemble the Jedi within. Kyle landed on the warrior's forehead and jumped from there to the ground. The columns were clearly visible . . . and he jogged in that direction.

If the Rebel had been more deliberate and less focused on Jan, he might have noticed a statue unlike those around it. A statue that not only appeared to be alive, but actually was.

Boc followed Kyle with his eyes but was otherwise still. The other Jedi might have sensed his presence if it hadn't been for a carefully constructed mind shield. Katarn was alive! But that was impossible, wasn't it? Where was Sariss? Yun? Both questions were answered when Boc spotted the youngest Jedi's lightsaber, a sure sign that they were dead. No great loss in Boc's opinion, but surprising nonetheless. The Rebel led a charmed life, but not for much longer.

Unaware of Boc and the nature of his thoughts, Kyle broke into the clearing. Jan saw him and grinned. "Kyle! Nice of you to drop in."

Kyle thumbed the switch on Yun's lightsaber and used the weapon to cut Jan's bonds. Kyle's words were light, but hid a deep sense of relief. "This will cost you . . ."

Jan felt the restraints fall free and rubbed her arms. "Send the bill . . . I'm ready to pay"

"And so you will," Boc said coldly "And so you will." There was a thump as the Dark Jedi jumped down off his perch, followed by the angry buzz of clashing sabers.

Kyle held against the other Jedi's strength and pushed with all his might. Boc smiled. His teeth looked like

tombstones. "All things come to an end, Katarn- give Maw, Sariss, and Yun my best."

The words covered action, and Jan shouted a warning. "Kyle! Watch out! He has two sabers!"

The Rebel jumped backward as the second bar of energy blurred past his face. He had noticed the second weapon during the earlier confrontation and forgotten it. A stupid, possibly fatal, mistake. Kyle was afraid. Boc sensed the emotion and shuffled forward.

"Perhaps you would like to learn something before you die. The use of two blades, one to support the other, can be traced back thousands of years and was common to both our species. The invention of lightsabers has done nothing to lessen the effectiveness of this strategy, as you are about to learn."

Actually thanks to Tal, and the old man's considerable experience, Kyle knew something about fighting with two blades, which meant he knew how dangerous such a combination could be. Not that the knowledge would help him much, given the fact that he had only one weapon at his disposal.

"One weapon only?" a voice said within his head. "What of your mind? Are you Jedi? Or something less?"

The words, and the fact that Rahn was with him, brought new hope.

Boc advanced. His lightsabers seemed to dance before him. They hummed with barely contained malice and wove intricate patterns in the air. The movements had a hypnotic quality and Kyle struggled to resist it.

Energy sizzled as blade met blade. Kyle retreated as Boc launched a flurry of blows. The Dark Jedi grinned triumphantly shuffled forward, and "felt" an additional threat. He spun toward Jan. The Rebel threw the rocks as hard as she could, but to no avail. The missiles exploded as the sabers touched them and hurled red-hot bits of rock in every direction. Jan staggered and fell over backward as a bolt of energy hit her mind.

The rock attack hadn't inflicted any damage, but it did buy

some time. Kyle took advantage of the opportunity by summoning the Force, forging a spear of midnight black, and hurling it toward his opponent's chest.

Boc staggered, dropped the lightsabers, and grabbed the invisible shaft. Kyle watched, fascinated as the other Jedi struggled to remove the weapon and failed to do so. He tripped, fell, and collapsed. A statue towered above him. Newar Forrth, one-time commander of the Third Legion of Light, appeared pleased.

The sound of distant laughter echoed through Kyle's mind. "Wonderful! That's the second time you called on the dark side. Now do you understand? The power is all around you, waiting to be used. Kill the girl, cut your ties to the past, and claim the future."

Unaware of the interchange, Jan ran into his arms. "Kyle! Are you all right? I don't know what you did, but it worked."

The Rebel wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "Come, let's find Jerec."

"That shouldn't be too hard," Jan replied. "Look!"

Kyle looked and saw shafts of light shoot upward to play across the ceiling. They ran in that direction. Jan ducked as a screamer howled by her head. "What was that?"

"Don't worry about it," Kyle responded. "It can't hurt you."

"Can't hurt you, can't hurt you, can't hurt you," a chorus of voices echoed, only to be supplanted by a tidal wave of incomprehensible babble that closed around them.

Many of the spirits were insane, having lost track of reality during eons of imprisonment, but some were not. They offered conflicting advice. "Refuse the dark side, boy."

"Leave us! Flee while you can!"

"Fight him, son, for there is no alternative."

There were other voices as well- some of which spoke alien tongues- but none as clear as the one from within. "To know where evil grows and permit it to flourish is to accept responsibility for all that follows."

A mound appeared in front of them. It marked the center of the Valley and the point from which the rays of light emanated.

Someone had left footprints in the soft soil, and Kyle followed them up onto the mound. Jan followed. The light, which had grown more intense, strobed upward and splashed across the rocky ceiling.

Kyle could "feel" the power gathering around him and knew time was running out. "Stop him!" a disembodied voice begged. "Stop him before he enslaves the billions we fought to defend! Even now he strengthens the bonds that hold us here! He plans to feed on us, to take our power, to use it for evil!"

Kyle started to reply but stopped when the ground started to shake and debris rained from above. It was difficult to walk, so he scrambled on all fours, determined to reach the top of the mound. The center was hollow. Dirt fell away from the edge and avalanched into the depression below.

Jan arrived at Kyle's side, looked into the mound, and was amazed by what she saw: Jerrec, quivering with the power that coursed through his body, light spilling from empty eye sockets. His voice came from everywhere at once. "Yes! Join me! Share the power!"

Kyle moved forward; Jan grabbed for his arm and missed. The Jedi jumped, fell through the air, and absorbed the impact with his legs. His lightsaber sizzled as he turned it on.

"Yessss," the chorus chanted, "free us that we might merge with the Force!"

Jerrec chose to ignore the lightsaber and the spirit voices. He spoke without turning. "Your efforts are misguided. Can you hear them? Whining and sniveling? Is that what you seek to become? Another voice in a chorus of weakness?"

Jerrec turned, extended his hand, and triggered an explosion. Kyle was propelled up and out of the chamber and onto the Valley floor. The impact knocked the air from his lungs. He was lying there, trying to breathe, when an icy wind swept through the Valley.

It circled slowly at first, as if gathering energy, before steadily picking up speed. Dust and other bits of debris were vacuumed up and whirled about. Voices wailed as



mist billowed and the temperature continued to drop.

Kyle made it to one knee as Jerec levitated up and out of the mound. Voices moaned as large chunks of the inner mound and paving stones followed him up.

Kyle stood, heart pounding, staring upward. What could he do? Jerec had claimed the Valley's power, had already harnessed it, and would soon rule what remained of the Empire. And then what? A new Empire, worse than the first. Despair threatened to pull him down. To come so far only to have failed those who counted on him was worse than death.

The Rebel watched Jerec rise and marveled at the power the Dark Jedi had unleashed. Power waiting to be used, power that could defeat Jerec, that could pull him down.

Kyle brought himself up short. What had Jerec said? That's the second time you called on the dark side. What was the magic number, anyway? The repetitions beyond which one was changed? Was it three? Four? Five?

Suddenly, Kyle knew that the number didn't matter, that the light side offered more than enough power for any task, and that knowledge was the key.

The Jedi closed his eyes, resisted the temptation to look at the light that strobed against his eyelids, and sent a series of commands. He gathered the Force around him, shaped it into a protective cocoon, and scaled Jerec within.

Jerec felt a sense of warmth and peace as the cocoon of light formed around him. It was a wonderful sensation, and one he enjoyed, until something went wrong. The Jedi fell, struggled to stay aloft, and fell again. Something, or someone, had cut his access to the dark side of the Force.

Who? How? The Dark Jedi fought to break through and knew it was too late. The dark, nearly black column of energy that pushed up out of the mound had been severed, and he, along with the rocks that had risen with him, plummeted to the ground.

Kyle opened his eyes, saw the Dark Jedi fall, and knew he had taken the correct approach. By doing something positive, by protecting Jerec from evil, the battle had been

won. The ground under Kyle's boots crunched as he approached the fallen Jerec.

Though stunned and badly bruised, Jerec was otherwise uninjured. In spite of his blindness, the Dark Jedi knew that Kyle stood over him with lightsaber in hand. His own weapon lay ten meters away, but may as well have been on the far side of the planet. Having never shown mercy to others, Jerec sought none for himself.

"Strike me down and the power of the dark side will be yours! It was I who took your father's head, or have you forgotten?"

Kyle looked down at the man before him and felt a strange sense of pity. Here he was, physically powerless, but still hoping to bring Kyle over or, failing that, to secure a quick and painless death.

The Rebel shook his head. "No, I haven't forgotten, and I never will." He extended his hand, felt the Dark Jedi's lightsaber strike the surface of his palm, and then threw the weapon to Jerec.

Jerec leaped to his feet and thumbed the power switch. Energy crackled as he moved forward, and Kyle came to meet him. The Rebel spun on the ball of his right foot, executed what Tal called the "falling leaf" and "slashed from the sky"

Jerec stutter-stepped, brought his weapon up and across, and waited for the inevitable result.

Something warm touched his side, sliced inward, and stopped just short of his spine.

It took Jerec a moment to understand what it was, to realize that his life had come to an end, and to start his long, dark journey.

Jan arrived at Kyle's side as Jerec's body started to fall. It seemed to lose substance as the Force departed, and it landed like a shadow on the ground.

The ancient bonds that Jerec had worked so hard to repair had been strained by the recent turmoil. Now, subjected to even more stress as the prisoners hurled themselves about, the invisible fabric began to tear. One of the more active

spirits spotted the hole, slipped through, and was quickly followed by another. An unseen chorus screamed their joy, circled the Valley; and poured into the sky.

A joyful singing was heard as the spirits rode the wind out into the atmosphere and Kyle felt a chill run up his spine as voices thanked him, one after another. And then they were gone. Kyle knew that the Army of Light had set forth on one last journey; that his mission was at an end.

The storm went on for what seemed like a long time but was no more than minutes. Finally, after the wind had died down and one last screamer had followed the rest, the Rebels turned away.

The walk out through the monuments was a slow, almost reverential affair that ended in front of a long stone wall. Kyle whirled in response to a series of clicks, whirs, and beeps, saw Wee Gee, and grinned.

"Weeg! You survived the crash! I'm glad you found us." The droid squeaked happily and propelled itself forward.

Kyle turned toward the wall, triggered his saber, and struck a carefully aimed blow. A section of stone fell away and landed at his feet.

Wee Gee turned his vid pickup in Jan's direction, and she shrugged.

The Rebel, unaware of the byplay behind his back, knelt before the wall. He said, "Thank you, Father," and Jan, who had moved close enough to see, saw two freshly carved reliefs. She had seen bolos of Morgan Katarn and knew him by sight. The other face was new, but Kyle had described him often enough, and she knew it was Rahn. There was a moment of silence as Kyle bowed his head and flowed with the Force.

Then, with Jan's hand in his and Wee Gee following behind, the Rebels made their way out of the Valley and up into the sunlight. And it was then, at that exact moment, that the prophecy came true.

A knight had come, a battle had been fought, and the prisoners were free.





